

The new vulnerability of humanitarian workers: what is the proper response?

An ICRC delegate's view

Security under threat

“The security [of humanitarian personnel in the field] is a *political* rather than a technical issue. No rule or protective measure can replace the establishment of a network of contacts among all the parties to a conflict, to convince every one of them of the ICRC's neutrality, impartiality and independence. If those in charge of combatants perceive the ICRC as taking sides, then the organization becomes a potential target. Conversely, neutrality, and above all the combatants' perception of that neutrality, offer the warring parties their best assurance that the ICRC poses no threat to them. The neutral stance of its delegates convinces combatants that the ICRC's humanitarian action has no effect on military operations.” This is one of the basic premises of the guidelines on security that the ICRC drew up a few years ago for use in its action in the midst of armed conflict.

Those guidelines are sound: they are sober and moderate, the fruit of years of experience of humanitarian action in conflicts on all continents and at all latitudes. It is hard to imagine a humanitarian institution like the ICRC suddenly changing them, for they strike a simple and realistic balance between good sense and good will.

Yet in the past few months attacks on ICRC representatives have occurred on an unprecedented scale. To cite no more than the most infamous examples, three were killed in an ambush in Burundi in June 1996 and six others — mostly members of National Red Cross Societies — were murdered in their sleep in Chechnya in December. This situation prompts several questions. Are the ICRC's security guidelines still valid in the current circumstances? Are they properly understood and complied

with by those in charge of operations, or are they being eroded as time goes by and as danger becomes a habit, matched by a misplaced faith in some sort of humanitarian immunity? Or, on the other hand, could it be that the circumstances in which emergency humanitarian action takes place have changed to the point that it can no longer be conducted without a gun in one's hand or at risk of one's life? Or can this new vulnerability affecting the humanitarian organizations be explained by the emergence of new forms of banditry, the entry of new and particularly bloodthirsty players on the international scene, the anarchy that is gaining ground in various regions of the world, the cynicism of leaders and the breakdown of discipline in armed groups?

Admittedly, the ICRC and other components of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement are not harder hit by this wave of attacks, killings and hostage-taking incidents than any other humanitarian organization, whether private or part of the United Nations system. But whether we admit it or not, the Movement in general (and the ICRC in particular) used to believe it enjoyed a greater degree of protection from the effects of warfare than other organizations, on account of its longstanding tradition, working principles, independence, impartiality and expertise; and because of the universal significance of the red cross emblem and the organization's first-hand and uninterrupted experience of warfare. That idea is now in ruins. It was a pipe-dream that failed to withstand the test of events. We must now recognize that all humanitarian organizations are equally vulnerable.

The nature of present-day conflicts

There is no shortage of explanations for this new vulnerability. The one usually given, because it is the most obvious and in some measure the most spectacular, is the emergence of new and generally disorganized armed groups which appear to be singularly unaware of the very idea of respect for humanitarian action. Conventional wisdom usually places them in Africa and likes to describe them as fearing neither God nor man, and being largely made up of very young, undisciplined and bloodthirsty fighters who are often on drugs, have no objectives or principles, and indulge in orgies of looting, rape and murder. The Western imagination, whetted by sensational reports and century-old obsessions, laps up these "new barbarians". At a time when the comfortable certainties of a bipolar view of the world no longer mask the diversity of causes underlying armed conflict, these groups have aroused considerable interest and, for want of any other explanation, are attributed unwarranted importance. It would of course be wrong to pretend that they do not exist or to ignore the risks

that their unpredictable behaviour causes for humanitarian workers, let alone the suffering they inflict on the population of the regions where they operate. But it would also be wrong to generalize about a phenomenon which, when all is said and done, is still confined to a few specific regions and is nothing new. The armed groups in Afghanistan have little in common with those in Liberia; the recent genocide in Rwanda followed a pattern peculiar to the Great Lakes region of Africa and tells us nothing about the course of the conflict in the former Yugoslavia or the behaviour of armed groups operating in Chechnya, Myanmar or Sudan. Lumping them together in a special category of “new players in conflicts”, with wanton but deliberate use of unbridled violence as their common denominator, would mean rejecting them out of hand, considering any dealings with them as unseemly, and, in a word, would make humanitarian action impossible in vast regions of the world.

The humanitarian organizations have to protect their staff against the banditry which generally accompanies situations of armed conflict, whatever its origin. To do so they must not only take the necessary technical protective measures, but also seek to establish a dialogue with all the armed groups present, without prejudice and whatever the objectives — or lack of them — ascribed to such groups. It is only when, in a given context, experience eventually shows such dialogue to be impossible that the dilemma arises as to whether operations should be suspended and humanitarian workers withdrawn.

The same applies by extension to the situations of complete anarchy, which by a strange reticence have come to be known as “unstructured” conflicts. World history offers myriad examples of such situations, each of which is one of a kind. One of the particularities of recent developments is that we in the wealthy countries have the impression that the periods of chaos which have always punctuated war and revolution, and which rarely lasted more than a few days or weeks, are now dragging on for so long in certain regions that they are becoming a new form of normality, a lawless normality in which humanitarian workers no longer have a place. Here Somalia and Liberia come to mind. However, that view is misleading. It is not so much a description of reality as an indication of the difficulty foreigners have in grasping the complex way in which societies in crisis function, once the breakdown of authority has reached a certain threshold (we used to speak of “Balkanization”; more recently the term has been “Lebanization”). Obviously, the proliferation of warring parties does increase risks. It changes neither their nature nor their intensity but simply makes them more diverse. The more a conflict becomes fragmented, the more vital it is for humanitarian workers to display subtlety

and empathy, courage and modesty, probity and flexibility. Here again, like any other organization concerned exclusively with the immediate fate of victims, the ICRC has no possible course other than dialogue and open-mindedness.

Another theory often advanced to explain the increased vulnerability of the humanitarian organizations is that it arises from a change in the underlying nature of armed conflict; that the organizations, basking in outdated certainties and incapable of adapting, are now paying the price for their own short-sightedness. It is claimed that armed conflicts have lost both their ideological nature and their strategic significance since the Cold War ended in the early 1990s and, as a result, are no longer subject to any constraints. Now, the argument goes, they are fought for ethnic or cultural reasons. They are said to be closely bound up with the subjective affirmation of collective identity that is seen as promoting exclusion, the aim being to eliminate totally rather than to conquer the adversary, combatants and civilians alike. It is no longer a matter of neutralizing the enemy, as the military used to say, but of annihilating entire peoples. In these circumstances humanitarian action, which by definition seeks to ensure respect for the adversary — and therefore at least his survival — inevitably clashes head on with the explicit designs of the belligerents. A humanitarian agency then faces an impossible choice: rising up courageously against *their objectives* at the risk of being driven promptly from the field, or giving up *its own mission* in a sort of guilty compromise, thus running the risk of no longer serving any purpose and standing by as a helpless witness of massacres, forced population displacements, large-scale and unjustifiable destruction of property, torture and extermination. In either case the failure would be total and painful, and the service to war victims practically nil. The contradiction would be insurmountable. The civilian and military authorities in that sort of conflict would soon size things up and, if necessary, would have no scruples about using their weapons against humanitarian staff seen as inconvenient witnesses to their sinister handiwork. That, it is claimed, is how the conflicts of the future will unfold: humanitarian action is lost; it belongs to a past in which order and decency prevailed, and within the next few decades will vanish for ever, swept away in the blood of those still naive enough to devote their lives to it.

Even if that apocalyptic picture is somewhat of a caricature, it contains enough half-truths to have convinced some and has given rise to a certain amount of discussion. The argument is, however, a pernicious one: first because all wars, regardless of the ideological framework with which they have been associated, have always to a greater or lesser degree comprised

an affirmation of group identity (national, ethnic, racial, religious, ideological, cultural, linguistic, social, clan-based, etc.) and rejection of the adversary — and disregarding that fact now is to make light of the sufferings of the countless victims of past wars and genocide; second, because it is simply a generalization based on a few recent cases in which ethnic violence has reached extreme proportions (we are not trying to minimize their effect), and it forces humanitarian action into a narrow choice between *denunciation* and *compromise*, which is both sterile and condemnatory. The challenge of humanitarian action in the field lies precisely in recognizing that human beings, today as in the past, are capable of the worst atrocities, about which we must remain pitilessly lucid, and in doing all we can in the direst moments to remind men that they are also capable, with the same intensity, of compassion, generosity and respect — in a word, of humanity. Decreeing that humanitarian action is obsolete on the grounds that it is all too badly needed on some occasions would be like renouncing medicine because the hospitals are full.

It is nonetheless a fact that in such situations where life seems so cheap, the risks for humanitarian workers are high. Here again, however, the humanitarian organizations' only weapon is dialogue. For the sake of humanity, all their efforts must focus on refining that dialogue.

The internal management of humanitarian organizations

If the nature of today's major conflicts cannot really be said to be new, if the protagonists in such conflicts are merely a modern version of a species known since time immemorial, if the aims of war today are no different from those of wars of the past, and if none of the characteristics attributed to present-day conflicts suffices to explain the deterioration in the conditions in which humanitarian action takes place, how can we account for this new vulnerability?

In plain terms, if the cause is not external, could it lie within? Could the humanitarian organizations be making more mistakes today than in the fairly recent past? Have they become lax, or are they taking more risks? Could their management be at fault?

It would of course be unreasonable to rule out, without detailed analysis, the possibility that internal factors are to blame, not only out of deference to the memory of those who have lost their lives in the course of their duties but also out of an ordinary sense of responsibility vis-à-vis those now working in dangerous regions. However, that explanation does not hold water any more than the previous one. Everyone recognizes, of course, that fatal errors can sometimes be committed by the top officials

of a humanitarian organization in the field or at headquarters, and the organizations certainly do all in their power to avoid such mistakes. But an error committed by an individual does not constitute a trend, and is not enough to explain the current deterioration. Indeed, were it possible to trace security incidents back to certain individuals, it would be surprising if all the humanitarian organizations were to suffer from the same phenomenon at the same time.

The global environment

In fact, the factors that have wrought the greatest changes in the working conditions of humanitarian organizations over the past few years are not so much the realities on the ground as political and media manoeuvring in the world's major capitals. Curiously enough, humanitarian activities are being made more dangerous by such factors as the popularity of humanitarian operations among the general public in the developed countries, the increasing interest taken by States in humanitarian action, the growing involvement of the United Nations and other international organizations in efforts to restore peace in regions affected by conflict, and the proliferation of humanitarian agencies.

The number of humanitarian players is, indeed, steadily rising. In the past quarter-century the traditional organizations (UN agencies, major non-governmental organizations and the Red Cross) have been joined by a multitude of smaller organizations, often specializing in a particular sphere of activity (aid to children, orthopaedics, etc.) or region of the world. Some of them, born of a burst of altruism sparked by the media, only last long enough to carry out a few sporadic operations. Others, in contact with reality in the field, gradually start to make headway. Such organizations are not necessarily impartial in any given conflict: why should they be? Each pursues its own objectives and develops the operational methods it deems appropriate, even if they sometimes differ widely; there is nothing wrong with that. Clearly, however, the warring parties — particularly when many small factions are involved — are neither interested in nor able to appreciate that diversity. They see the humanitarian players as a somewhat indistinct whole: if one organization offends them, all are incriminated. The security of all the organizations depends on the security of each one.

Most important of all, the central fact in this new vulnerability is definitely of a political nature and must be coldly recognized as such. Humanitarian action (at least of the sort we are discussing here) is a Western notion and, whether we like it or not, purveys a world view

imbued with Christian morality and individualism and placing a premium on suffering and compassion. Virtually all the major humanitarian organizations have their roots in the Western countries or their closest allies. Moreover, they share their ideological and political origins with the cultural system which gave birth to the United Nations Organization and still dominate it. And they can only operate as long as they have financial support from the Western States and public.

It is therefore hardly surprising that the disintegration of the USSR, which deprived the Western powers of a common adversary around which their foreign policy was organized, should have led them to take a greater interest in humanitarian action — already familiar ground to them — to the point of making it a central feature in explaining that policy to domestic public opinion. A lot has been said about this substitution of humanitarian activities for political action, particularly in connection with Europe's attitude to the crisis in the former Yugoslavia, and there is no need to revert to the matter here. More important are the consequences of that attitude and the way it has resulted in a sharp increase in government pressure on the humanitarian organizations.

In simple terms, the trend is no longer for governments merely to agree or refuse to finance this or that project devised by a humanitarian organization, but to incorporate it in their overall policy towards the country concerned. In extreme cases a State, forced to react to a crisis and perhaps wrong-footed by an emotional reaction from public opinion, may announce that its foreign policy in that particular case will be largely humanitarian. Quite legitimately, however, it sets out to define that policy in terms of its own interests, whether they be strategic, economic, political, military or commercial. From the plethora of projects of all kinds in search of funding, it selects those which best serve its political objectives. And, without false shame, it uses the power conferred upon it by the size of its contribution to the budgets of the major humanitarian organizations to try to influence them, shape their priorities and play a part in defining their objectives; in short, it tries to turn them into objective agents of its own policy. Some organizations are better than others at resisting this political interference in humanitarian action, though none can claim to escape it entirely.

At the same time — and this is another expression of the same trend — direct United Nations involvement in theatres of conflict has expanded. There is an ever-growing number of peace-keeping or peace-making operations for which, quite naturally, the international community has adopted a comprehensive approach combining parallel military, humani-

tarian and political-diplomatic components. Increasingly, soldiers of the international cause, serving largely as guarantors of political processes initiated in New York and as living proof of the importance attached to those processes, have found themselves responsible for protecting civilians and installations essential to their survival or for securing access routes, and then for guaranteeing the security of humanitarian agencies and the delivery of relief across front lines, and even in some cases for actually distributing relief supplies. Indeed, in some conflicts humanitarian assistance has become increasingly reliant on military logistics and, what is more, has largely merged into a political panorama defined far from the conflict itself.

The term *humanitarian* has become infinitely elastic: a massacre or the mass exodus of a threatened population is known as a “humanitarian crisis”; the dispatch of troops to break up fighting between rebel factions is termed “humanitarian intervention”; while violations of international humanitarian law or human rights are “humanitarian setbacks”. Gradually, we are coming to accept that the only successful outcome of humanitarian action — and therefore its goal — is the establishment of peace. This is not simply a semantic drift but a profound political change: nowadays humanitarian action is not allowed to confine itself to providing immediate and non-political assistance for war victims but is obliged, in the name of moral precepts shared for cultural reasons, to act as an instrument for promoting peace. And peace, by definition, is political. It is made up of compromise, calculated self-interest, military realities, weariness and hope. Yet there can be no doubt that the security of humanitarian workers depends on the non-political nature of their action.

By way of a conclusion

The present global political and media environment is tending to limit the autonomy of the humanitarian organizations (to the detriment of their independence), to steer their efforts towards certain spheres of activity or certain zones (with no regard for the principle of impartiality), and to assign them a leading role in settling conflicts (thus jeopardizing their neutrality). So three of the main principles of Red Cross action are now under threat. But those principles, over and above their moral value, have a practical and essentially operational function.

The ICRC’s security guidelines mentioned at the beginning of this article said it all: the security of humanitarian personnel depends on the combatants’ perception of the neutrality, impartiality and independence of humanitarian action. To be specific, if a combatant sees a humanitarian

organization (or its staff) as a threat, a tool of the adversary, or a means of political interference in the development of the conflict; if he identifies it as part of a world plot against him or the cause he is defending, or simply as a symbol of what he is fighting, he will try to eliminate it. For such is the logic of warfare.

In other words, the greater the effort to assign to humanitarian action in conflict situations any aims apart from providing immediate, unconditional and impartial protection and assistance to those who need it, regardless of any other consideration whatsoever, the greater the danger to humanitarian workers.

The principal cause of the new vulnerability of humanitarian staff lies in that insidious drift towards the politicization of humanitarian action.

So what is to be done? The answer is simple: humanitarian action must again be separated, by a more impermeable barrier than ever before, from political action. It is for the political authorities to try to settle the conflicts of all sorts now raging around the world. They have all the necessary diplomatic, military and economic means for doing so. For their part, the humanitarian organizations mandated to operate in conflict zones will do their utmost to relieve the suffering caused by those conflicts, without becoming entangled in politics. Even if it seems simplistic, this return to a clear separation of roles is inevitable. The present amalgam of politics and humanitarian action carries within it the seeds of its own failure: by adding political dangers to the dangers inherent in humanitarian operations carried out in present-day conflicts, it makes humanitarian action impossible where it is most needed. Then, when the humanitarian agencies withdraw from zones which have become impracticable, the sponsors of that policy will lose the very foundations underpinning their strategy.

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