

In view of the fact that the civilian population has been spared no suffering or humiliation over the past six years — and in particular since the present fighting started on 6 April — the ICRC feels that a thorough reappraisal is needed. It therefore calls on the community of States to take into account the particular nature of this type of conflict in its urgent search for ways to restore order and stability.

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The ICRC's Delegate General for Africa gave the Review his initial thoughts on the issue raised in the press release reproduced above.

Liberia: humanitarian logistics in question

Since 6 April 1996, there have been new and dramatic developments in the conflict in Liberia, and there are again grounds for fearing the worst with regard to the survival of the civilian population. The ICRC once more deplores and condemns the serious and systematic violations of the elementary rules of international humanitarian law and of the minimum principles of humanity that have been committed since the start of the conflict in December 1989.

For six and a half years the civilian population, the wounded, persons placed *hors de combat* and prisoners have been regularly subjected to killings, torture, mutilation, hostage-taking, forced labour, looting, destruction of property and forced displacements. Children have been enlisted to fight and even dead bodies have been desecrated. Tens of thousands of people have been killed or wounded, more than half of the country's inhabitants have been driven from their homes, traditional mechanisms of cohabitation among different groups have been swept away, moral boundaries and all reference to the principles and values that underlie and unite any human community have disappeared. The efforts made by the international community to put an end to the tragedy have not succeeded in checking this inexorable degradation.

None of the many peace accords negotiated with great patience and in the face of major difficulties has been observed by the various factions involved. There has never been any real security or respect for the individual despite the presence of troops — mainly West African — charged with keeping the peace, United Nations military observers, UN specialized agencies, non-governmental organizations and the Red Cross.

Once again, after its temporary withdrawals from part of the country in July 1990 and in October 1992, and following the tragic events in the interior of the country in September 1994, the ICRC lost most of its equipment and stocks during the recent developments in Monrovia. The logistic resources of the humanitarian players on the spot have been repeatedly looted and have thus served to strengthen the operational capacity of the warring factions. Vehicles and radio and telecommunications equipment, to mention only the most sensitive items, are in the hands of increasingly undisciplined combatants. Year after year, the humanitarian organizations have replaced these logistic resources and have thus unwillingly contributed to a continuous cycle of looting carried out in all impunity.

Moreover, the proliferation of humanitarian organizations present in Liberia has inevitably led to compromises which have resulted in a deterioration in working procedures and in the quality of the services provided. In these circumstances, conducting a neutral and impartial humanitarian operation is becoming ever more difficult and uncertain.

The ICRC has observed that successive changes in the situation have put the civilian population at the mercy of the various combatants, who live at its expense; while benefiting from emergency humanitarian aid to help them survive, civilians are also suffering its pernicious effects.

The ICRC feels that the time has come for a reappraisal, and that it is no longer possible to continue assistance operations automatically, with the same predictable consequences for the victims.

Humanitarian action must not serve as a pretext to mask the grim reality of a country where the law and minimum values of humanity are flouted daily, and where a false sense of security gives rise to disasters such as the one witnessed since 6 April.

In the ICRC's opinion, solidarity with the victims of the situation in Liberia is and will remain indispensable. However, a humanitarian operation with lasting effects will be possible only if security is guaranteed, not only for the victims of the conflict but also for humanitarian workers. To this end, a genuine effort must be made to restore order and maintain

stability. This effort must precede and be carried out independently from the humanitarian operations that will have to be set up as a matter of utmost urgency in the coming weeks.

Primary responsibility lies indisputably with the Liberians themselves, and particularly with the transitional government and/or the faction leaders. Moreover, to remedy the country's chronic instability and to avoid negative repercussions in the region, the community of States, seeing that Liberia is spinning out of control, cannot limit its response to funding emergency humanitarian operations. It should step up its efforts to work out a comprehensive political solution involving the taking of decisions, diplomatic moves and practical action. Thus, should the current peace-keeping operation be maintained, it should receive support in terms of funds, equipment and manpower, to ensure that it is in a position to fulfil its mandate effectively and in all neutrality. Such an approach would make it possible to undertake the humanitarian operations that are so urgently needed to relieve the suffering endured by Liberia's civilian population, while avoiding the untoward effects that such operations have had in the past.

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