# Security in ICRC field operations

by Philippe Dind

In any discussion about security, the primary consideration must be the need to preserve the neutrality, independence and impartiality of humanitarian action. This is the essential precondition for the ICRC's ability to protect and assist the victims of conflict. Sooner or later, any humanitarian activity which runs counter to these fundamental principles either incurs the mistrust of the people it intends to assist or becomes completely paralysed.

In the course of the last 20 years there have been many major changes both in the nature of conflicts and in the ICRC itself. The number of ICRC expatriate staff working in the field and the number of operations conducted by the organization have increased tenfold, and the number of locally hired staff has risen in about the same proportion. Statistically, therefore, the probability of a security incident occurring is greater now than in the past. Moreover, the ICRC's *modus operandi* has also evolved. As ICRC delegates' activities take them closer to the fighting than before, their working conditions have become more hazardous.

The conflict environment too has changed considerably. For example, it has become a platitude to remark that the chain of command among combatants has weakened to the point where it is often difficult to distinguish between the armed forces and gangs of bandits. All these factors

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combined make it extremely difficult for the ICRC to adhere to its tra-ditional working methods. The number of people that have to be contacted to ensure that an operation runs smoothly has risen sharply, without this having any favourable effect on security — quite the contrary.

These developments have prompted the ICRC to focus even greater attention on matters relating to the safety of its field activities. What follows is an outline of the organization's general approach to security.

*The first tenet of the ICRC's security policy* is that, for delegates, danger is not the exception. It is often part of their working environment and thus should always be taken into account in operational decisions.

*The second tenet* is that although security has its technical aspects, it is above all a political issue. No security rule and no protective measures can replace the establishment of a network of contacts among all the parties to a conflict so as to convince them of the ICRC's neutrality, impartiality and independence. For if those in charge of fighting troops see the organization as biased, it will be a potential target. On the other hand, neutrality — and above all the combatants' perception of that neutrality, a perception which stems from the organization's independence and impartiality — is the best guarantee for the warring parties that the ICRC does not constitute a threat.

Security rules must be understood and applied with both these tenets in mind. Compliance with the rules brings the risk down to an acceptable level, but does not eliminate it altogether. Danger is inherent in the working conditions of ICRC staff. Eliminating it completely would mean withdrawing all personnel from their working environment. From this it follows that:

— even when ICRC staff are operating in situations fraught with danger, they must never act rashly or try to intervene in the fighting; daring or reckless behaviour very rarely has a lasting and positive humani-tarian impact;

— the danger inherent in the working environment of ICRC staff must in no way diminish their sense of responsibility for their decisions, regardless of the level at which such decisions are taken.

For these reasons every security incident must be analysed and, if necessary, an internal inquiry is carried out to determine whether the conduct of the delegates concerned played any role in the course of events. However, in view of the hazardous working conditions which have been accepted by the ICRC, in such inquiries care should be taken not to condemn or blame specific individuals too hastily.

**The ICRC's response to danger**

The risks involved in fulfilling the ICRC's mandate vary according to the theatre of operations. The notion of security in the field covers both conflict situations and banditry or crime. At times it can be difficult to distinguish clearly between the two. What can be said, however, is that criminal acts are increasing both in frequency and in gravity.

*Defining risk*

Risk consists of two elements:

— the danger or threat itself, which can take different forms (theft, kidnapping, shelling, etc.) and vary in terms of the gravity of its consequences (human, operational or material);

— the probability of the dangerous event actually taking place.

As a rule, security measures are aimed at:

— preventing serious incidents by eliminating the possibility of their occurrence (the idea here is to remove potential targets, for example by avoiding cash transfers, making sure that expatriates stay out of no-go areas, or prohibiting travel by road where there may be land-mines);

— reducing risk by means of deterrents such as perimeter protection, guards and bomb shelters, or by means of preventive measures that promote respect for the ICRC's activities, staff and property (nego-tiations with the warring parties, use of the emblem, notification systems, etc.);

— limiting the consequences of an incident if it nevertheless occurs (medical evacuations, insurance, etc.).

Regardless of the measures taken, in the field a certain degree of risk remains inevitable, and expatriate staff have to learn to live with it. Recognizing this fact should not be interpreted as a lack of resolve to ensure their security, quite to the contrary: the fact that only a residual element remains means that everything possible has been done to mini-mize the risk.

Some levels of risk are considered acceptable only if they are justified by the humanitarian impact of the operation. A balance must always be struck between the risk an action entails and its anticipated effect. This rule applies as much as to an operation covering an entire country as to

an expatriate's day-to-day activities. It is important to assess the effects of operational activities in terms of quality rather than quantity, and regularly to ask the question whether the impact of a planned activity is worth the risk it involves. If the answer is "no", postponement or suspension of the operation should be considered. Moreover, it should be borne in mind that impact should be measured not only in terms of immediate benefits (food distributions, for example) but also with a view to the long term (surveys, etc.). Furthermore, no risks should be taken for the sake of maintaining a presence or for reasons of competition.

*Voluntary service*

The ICRC's expatriate and locally hired staff are employed on the basis of their clearly expressed willingness to accept an inevitable degree of risk. The organization therefore expects all staff to be willing to work in any theatre of operations.

There may be cases, however, in which expatriates have very definite reasons for refusing certain postings. The ICRC will accept such reservations relating to a particular place or time provided they are an exception; otherwise the whole principle of the staff member's continued employment may be called into question. If it is to remain effective, the ICRC must be able to count on the willingness of all its personnel to go anywhere and do any type of work. In principle, no especially dangerous postings or periods are reserved for "volunteers". Delegates are employed to work anywhere in the world.

The level of risk associated with a given operation must be the same for all concerned, both expatriate and locally hired staff. In particular, a national employee is never entrusted with a mission regarded as too dangerous for a delegate unless his or her nationality, ethnic origin or language constitutes a security factor. Conversely, an expatriate rather than a national employee will be assigned to carry out a mission if his or her status as a foreigner is a security factor. Moreover, account will always be taken of the fact that delegation employees may be subject to political pressures to which expatriates are immune, that any confidential information they carry with them may put them at greater risk, and that, unlike expatriates, they cannot usually be evacuated.

*The responsibility of superiors*

The cornerstone of security management at the ICRC is that everyone in the operational hierarchy assumes full responsibility for the matter, from the Director of Operations who, in the framework of the Executive

Board, has the authority to launch ICRC operations in a new conflict zone to the field delegate who decides whether to go ahead with travel plans or to abandon them if unforeseen dangers arise.

In this context the heads of delegation play a central role. Specifically, they are responsible for:

— ensuring the coherence of the security measures taken, notably by making sure that the ICRC is accepted at the political and operational levels;

— anticipating hazards by gathering and circulating information;

— drawing up security regulations and ensuring they are complied with;

— counteracting the tendency to become accustomed to danger, taking action when an incident does occur and being ready to listen to their staff;

— preparing emergency and/or evacuation procedures;

— giving training.

Although heads of delegation may delegate the day-to-day management of security-related tasks, they always bear ultimate responsibility for the matter.

*Training for all*

The best way of improving security is to give special priority to training, with a view to creating permanent awareness of risks, ensuring the consistency of security measures, and imparting the technical knowledge and the skills required for each individual to assume his or her responsibilities in this respect.

Training should be:

— given to expatriate and local staff alike;

— geared to the context and the specific risks facing each individual;

— adapted to each person's actual tasks and duties;

— given at headquarters and in the delegations.

General courses are held for newly recruited expatriate staff, on matters such as how to get through a checkpoint or obtain information about the security situation, and for senior operational staff, who learn how to draw up security regulations and what to do in the event of an incident.

Tailor-made courses are held for specialized staff. For example, administrators are taught how to arrange for the transfer of funds, builders how to construct shelters and protect buildings against intruders, dispatchers how to organize relief convoys, etc.

In short, the ultimate goal of training is to improve security arrangements, while drawing each individual's attention to the limits of the ICRC's mandate so as to prevent staff from taking risks that would overstep those limits (intervening in fighting or being present on front lines).

## The seven pillars of security

The ICRC's security policy for field operations relies on the seven "pillars" described below. The first few of these are virtually exclusive to the ICRC, while the last are adopted by all organizations or multinational corporations to protect expatriate staff. The order of importance assigned to each of them will vary according to the type of threat encountered. In particular, the choice of active or passive protective measures (No. 7) will clearly depend entirely on the local situation.

### 1. Acceptance of the ICRC

The concept of acceptance is of paramount importance to the ICRC. To be able to operate, the organization has to make sure it is accepted by the parties to the conflict. Such acceptance is thus entirely linked to the mandate conferred on the ICRC by the States party to the Geneva Conventions, its role as a neutral intermediary and its status as an impartial and independent humanitarian organization. The ICRC has no means of exerting pressure to impose its activities. Persuasion and influence are its only weapons. Viewed from this angle, vulnerability paradoxically offers a form of protection.

Thus it is through understanding of the ICRC's activities and its role, in particular as a neutral intermediary, that the warring parties come to accept its presence and its working procedures. The means used to achieve this aim are negotiation, projection of a consistent image, and efforts to spread knowledge of international humanitarian law and the Fundamental Red Cross/Red Crescent Principles. These activities have to be conducted at all levels; indeed, the disintegration of social structures and the emergence of warlords and organized crime make it indispensable for the ICRC to be accepted by all groups wielding any power (and not only the authorities of a constitutional State).

In many, but not all, situations, two other means are used to strengthen acceptance: promotion of ICRC activities by making them as visible as possible; and broadcasting information to a wide range of audiences via the local media. These means are used only if they actually contribute to improving security.

Another factor that enhances security is acceptance by expatriates of the culture in which they are working. If they learn to understand the local system of values and customs they can act in a manner consistent with their environment. This understanding is essential if they are to be able to adjust to different situations and to the way in which a particular society functions, without having to become part of it. All expatriates have a duty to spend the time needed to familiarize themselves with the political, social and cultural features of the country to which they have been assigned, notably by reading. Inappropriate behaviour may insidiously put the ICRC in a difficult position. Lastly, understanding how the armed groups operating in the ICRC's environment function and the way they think is vital in order to adjust security measures to the prevailing dangers.

## 2. Identification

The second pillar is a logical consequence of the first: once its special role has been accepted, the ICRC must be identifiable. Identification relies mainly on the red cross emblem. To distinguish itself from other "humanitarian" players who use or misuse the emblem, the ICRC uses a logo consisting of a red cross surrounded by two concentric black circles between which appear the words "Comité international Genève". Vehicles operating in sensitive situations fly the ICRC flag, which attracts special attention; however, care must be taken not to overuse this means of protection.

To supplement visual identification, buildings used by the ICRC and staff movements in the field are notified to all parties to the conflict. As modern methods of warfare make it possible to destroy a target long before visual contact has been established, notification is sometimes the only effective method of protection. This is particularly important when aircraft are used; here notification is an essential precaution in addition to the compulsory filing of a flight plan.

Lastly, special technical means such as flashing blue lights and radar transponders may be used to identify hospital ships or medical aircraft.[1]

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[1] See *Regulations concerning identification*, Annex I to Protocol I additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949 and relating to the protection of victims of international armed conflicts.

## 3. Information

In any high-risk situation, information is a fundamental element of security. Reliable information makes it possible to anticipate events and to react in an appropriate manner as situations develop or when dangers arise during field trips. Information should therefore flow in all directions — from senior staff downwards and vice versa, and between ICRC colleagues and outside contacts.

All field personnel, whether expatriates or field officers, must acquire the conditioned reflex of collecting and passing on as much information as possible on security matters, whether relating to the past or the present situation or to developing trends. All security incidents must be reported orally or in writing, depending on their importance, so that the delegation can take steps to avoid any similar events in the future or to anticipate more serious ones. Special attention must be paid to any signs that the situation is deteriorating, and care must be taken not to become accustomed to such signs, so as not to unconsciously raise one's threshold of tolerance of danger.

Information on any security incidents must reach the senior staff in charge of the delegation, who will report to headquarters with their comments, their analysis of the situation, and a description of the consequences and of any measures taken by the delegation.

Headquarters for its part passes on to the field any information brought to its attention which could affect security, such as developments in the political situation, possible reactions to any negotiations that might be in progress, information obtained from other humanitarian organizations, changes in the military situation, and the roles played by neighbouring countries or others further afield and by the major international organizations.

The head of delegation is responsible for circulating information of a general nature and organizing exchanges within the delegation, including locally hired staff, who are not only entitled to be kept abreast of developments but are also a very important source of local news and reports on changes in the overall climate.

As regards the exchange of information between the ICRC and other organizations and entities, it is essential to adopt an attitude that is as open as possible. Indeed, if there is one area in which the ICRC wants to learn as much as it can, not only to safeguard its own staff but also to prevent incidents that might affect other organizations, and thus to engage in a very liberal exchange of information, it is the area of security. Nonethe-

less, care is taken not to overstep the limits of confidentiality, for example by never seeking to obtain or pass on information of a military nature.

## 4. *The security regulations drawn up by individual delegations*

Each delegation has its own security rules which prescribe proper behaviour. They are drawn up under the authority of the head of delegation and are therefore specific to the country concerned. Where necessary, sub-delegations also have to draft security rules applicable to the local situation. On their arrival in the field all staff are briefed about security and sign a statement accepting the rules. The head of delegation is responsible for ensuring compliance with the rules; breaches will incur penalties which may go as far as dismissal from the ICRC, depending on the gravity of the case. The rules should lay down only the basic precautions and leave some room for manoeuvre. They are in no way a substitute for the responsibility every individual must assume towards himself and those affected by his or her decisions.

The rules must be as concise yet as comprehensive as possible. Indeed, it is vital that they should cover all relevant subjects while stating only the essentials, so as to ensure that they do not lose their full impact. Security rules are constantly updated in line with the situation and deal with both preventive measures and appropriate reactions in the event of a security incident.

## 5. *Personality*

The safety of the ICRC's field activities depends to a large extent on the personal attributes of its staff, the most important of which are solidarity and a sense of responsibility.

In dangerous or threatening situations or in other difficult circumstances, the security of several individuals may depend on one person's reactions and attitude. Both of these are determined not only by that person's character and level of physical and psychological resistance but also, and above all, by his or her sense of responsibility. Furthermore, what is needed is not so much a remarkably well-balanced personality but an awareness of one's own limits, the capacity to remain calm and clear-headed, and acceptance of any weak points that might be revealed in the course of the mission. In this respect, to discover in the heat of action that one is not cut out for the job and to give it up is evidence of courage and a sense of responsibility.

Another way of showing a sense of responsibility is to maintain a healthy lifestyle in the delegation. Although some weakening of one's

resistance to danger is natural, everyone must combat fatigue and nervous tension and preserve his or her physical and psychological well-being by eating properly and getting enough sleep and time off, rather than resorting to alcohol and medicines. The use of narcotic drugs and other illegal substances is totally prohibited.

If, in spite of efforts to keep to a healthy routine, a staff member experiences fear, despair or premonitions of death, or, at the other end of the scale, a sense of euphoria and invulnerability, it is important to recognize these feelings and to talk about them openly with colleagues or the head of delegation. In the face of danger, these reactions may be normal and can play a useful role in alerting us to and regulating stress. If they are acknowledged and discussed, they soon dissipate. If they are ignored and suppressed, they lead to the taking of unnecessary risks.

In this connection, solidarity is of fundamental importance. As everyone's resistance varies according to the circumstances and individual perceptions and sensitivities, staff must support each other in the delegations and during field operations. Talking over one's concerns and emotions is always the best way of maintaining a sense of perspective.

### 6. Telecommunications

Telecommunications play an important part in security by facilitating the transmission of information and notifications, the monitoring of and checking movements in the field, giving warning of a deterioration in the situation, or dealing with any crisis that may arise.

The facilities made available are geared to the specific situation, in terms of both quality and quantity:

— modern, reliable equipment, which can be operated independently of the local infrastructure and is serviced by the ICRC;

— a network appropriate to the geographical situation, with ICRC staff on site to set up and develop the telecommunications system as required;

— round-the-clock radio monitoring, if circumstances require;

— training of the users, facilitated by the greatest possible level of standardization.

### 7. Passive and active protective measures

Protective measures, whether passive or active, are taken only in situations where there is no other way of ensuring security. Sadly, such situations are on the increase. They fall into two main categories:

(a) When there is a risk of indiscriminate attacks against the civilian population, the ICRC is no longer protected by its special status. For preventive purposes, delegations will opt for premises that are not in an exposed position and that have passive protective facilities, mainly bomb shelters. Individual protective measures such as bullet-proof vests are not normally used, for two reasons: the ICRC does not accept that its staff might be potential targets, and it does not want them to take greater risks because they feel protected.

Whatever the protective measures taken, they are always as discreet as possible and must never be of military appearance.

(b) In situations where crime and banditry are rife, ICRC expatriate staff are in the same position as any other foreigner living in the country. In this kind of context the emblem offers no protection. Vulnerability becomes a risk factor and delegations must make sure they are hard targets by adopting protective measures such as physical barriers, alarm systems, guards, etc.

Active protective measures include armed escorts, which are used only in very exceptional circumstances and with the approval of headquarters.[2]

## Conclusion

The effectiveness of security regulations may be likened to the strength of a chain, which is as strong as its weakest link.

Thus security in the field depends on coherence between all seven factors described above. Heads of delegation are responsible for ensuring their proper application by each and every staff member.

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[2] In accordance with Resolution 9 (Armed protection of humanitarian assistance) of the Council of Delegates (Geneva, 1995), *IRRC*, No. 310, January-February 1996, pp. 150-151.