

International Committee of the Red Cross

Public statement by the ICRC on the situation in Kosovo

The ICRC has a long-standing policy of approaching parties to a conflict in a confidential manner, if it deems it necessary to draw their attention to violations of international humanitarian law or to issues which are otherwise unacceptable from a humanitarian standpoint, and to ask those responsible to change course. However, the ICRC has always kept open the option of making a public statement on conditions in a conflict situation, if the circumstances so require. This is normally the case when its delegates are faced with particularly serious humanitarian problems caused or aggravated by repeated or ongoing violations of fundamental humanitarian obligations.

On 15 September 1998, the ICRC published its "position on the crisis in Kosovo". The Review brings this document to the attention of its readers, as an example of a public statement made in a situation of conflict or internal strife.

ICRC position on the crisis in Kosovo

Events in Kosovo have taken a turn for the worse. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is convinced that the situation in the region has reached a critical stage in terms of its humanitarian implications for the civilian population, forcing all those involved in the conflict to face up to their responsibilities.

At this very moment, as has been the case for several weeks now, tens of thousands of civilians are caught up in a devastating cycle of attacks and displacements. They are exposed to violence, including threats to their lives, destruction of their homes, separation from their families and abductions. Thousands of them have nowhere left to go and no one to turn to for protection.

From a humanitarian perspective, it has become apparent that civilian casualties are not simply what has become known as “collateral damage”. In Kosovo, civilians have become the main victims — if not the actual targets — of the fighting. The core issue to be addressed immediately is that of the safety of, and hence respect for, the civilian population. First and foremost, this means that every civilian is entitled to live in a secure environment and to return to his or her home in safe and dignified conditions.

The authorities of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia have pledged to facilitate the return of displaced persons to their villages and have designated a dozen locations where aid will be distributed with their support. For their part, Western governments have in recent weeks put forward a number of proposals aimed at encouraging return to selected areas in Kosovo. In principle, all measures that can contribute to improving security conditions and building confidence are welcome. Indeed, a number of people are reported to have made their way back to some villages in central and western Kosovo.

However, a significant discrepancy has emerged between the policy of favouring returns and the very nature of the operations carried out by the security forces in past weeks. These operations have led to further killings and wounding of civilians, to large-scale destruction of private property and to further mass displacements. They have also created a climate of deep and widespread fear.

These latest events have added to the heavy price already paid by the civilian population, including the killing of dozens of Serb civilians and the abduction of over a hundred more, whose fate remains unknown.

The discrepancy between the policy of inviting the displaced to return to their homes and the manner in which operations are being conducted is illustrated by certain practices witnessed by ICRC delegates in the field.

Large-scale operations have been carried out against villages and other locations where displaced people have sought refuge. These have had the following consequences:

- The killing or wounding of civilians, large-scale destruction of property, and the flight of vast numbers of residents and people who had already been displaced. This was the situation on 10 September between Istnic and Krusevac, where panic-stricken civilians were forced to take to the roads once again just when the authorities were planning to open an additional aid centre in that very place.

- Fleeing civilians becoming trapped in remote areas or very exposed terrain. Some of them have suffered further attacks, for example the shelling on 29 August of people sheltering in a gorge near Sedlare.
- The screening of entire population groups for the stated purpose of identifying individuals having taken part in operations against the security forces, ill-treatment and intimidation during interrogation, and failure to notify families of the whereabouts of those being held. For instance, this happened in Ponorac on 5 September, when several dozen men were taken away. Their families are without news of them to date.
- Difficulties in securing access to medical treatment for the wounded and the sick in hospitals in Kosovo.

Today, thousands of civilians — Albanians, Serbs and others — are living in a climate of extreme insecurity and fear. The ICRC therefore wishes to state the following:

- Responsibility for ensuring the safety of and respect for the civilian population lies with the Serbian authorities. They must take every possible measure to protect civilians. Specifically, the ICRC calls on the Serbian authorities to put an end to the disproportionate use of force and to specific acts of violence directed against civilians, including the wanton destruction of property. The ICRC renews its appeal for rapid access, in accordance with its recognized working procedures, to all persons arrested in connection with the events in Kosovo.
- The ICRC calls on Albanian political representatives and on the UCK (Kosovo Liberation Army) to do everything possible to help put an end to the reported killings, and to enter into a meaningful dialogue on, and provide information about, the fate and whereabouts of abducted Serbs in Kosovo.
- Beyond the humanitarian implications lies the issue of the political settlement of the crisis. The ICRC is convinced that the international community needs to draw lessons from the experience gained in this respect elsewhere in the Balkans. The ICRC considers it crucial to keep the political and the humanitarian dimensions of the crisis clearly separate.

Displaced persons have only one wish, and that is to return home. They should be allowed to do so freely. However, until the conditions are created that enable them to do so, they should receive assistance wherever they are, and the places where humanitarian aid is provided ought not be limited to particular sites.

The ICRC is well aware of its responsibility to use all available means to reach civilians both in remote areas and in their own villages, to attempt to gain access to persons arrested, to establish the whereabouts of those abducted, and to ensure that the wounded and the sick receive adequate treatment. The ICRC currently has 17 expatriates and some 50 locally recruited staff operating under difficult conditions throughout Kosovo. It has the additional responsibility of mobilizing resources within the broader context of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

The ICRC will vigorously pursue its efforts to establish a dialogue with the Yugoslav authorities and the representatives of the Albanian community with a view to finding the most appropriate humanitarian response to the present crisis. It will seek to maintain close coordination with other humanitarian agencies in the field, such as UNHCR. It will also continue to coordinate and cooperate closely with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and with the Yugoslav Red Cross.

All those involved in the conflict must acknowledge and assume their respective responsibilities. This is a prerequisite if they are to succeed in alleviating the widespread insecurity and fear and in avoiding a potentially disastrous deterioration in the situation.

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