

## **A message from Afghanistan: The role of Afghan ICRC staff**

On 15 November 2001 the ICRC held a press conference in Geneva on the situation in Afghanistan and its activities in the country. A satellite phone link was established with the ICRC delegation in Kabul, where two ICRC staff members were standing by to answer questions such as: What had the ICRC staff in Kabul been able to do since mid-September and over the previous few days? How did our Afghan colleagues feel during that difficult time? How were people coping in Kabul? What was the ICRC currently doing in the city?

In the course of the press conference, and indeed during other interviews with (Western) journalists, it became clear that there was a strong tendency to overlook the humanitarian work carried out by local ICRC employees during the absence of expatriate ICRC staff, who had had to leave the country for security reasons.

This misapprehension has several consequences.

- First and foremost, it fails to give due recognition to those who managed, despite all the constraints imposed by the circumstances, to bring substantial assistance to people in distress. It should not be forgotten – to cite just two examples – that the ICRC's medical facilities in Kabul continued to function and to treat the sick and wounded, and that the ICRC managed to restore water supplies for 400,000 of the city's inhabitants.
- It also implies that humanitarian work can only be carried out when the "victors" have arrived, or worse, in the minds of some people or sectors of the media, when the "good" party has taken control. In short, it undermines the notion of neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action.
- Last but not least, it gives the impression that humanitarian action is only really credible and efficient when managed by expatriate staff.

The objective of the interview with our colleagues in Kabul was precisely to counteract such deep-seated misconceptions. We believe it is vitally important to find other opportunities and other ways of upholding our working principles and methods through communication at all levels and with all audiences.

We therefore wish to send out two fundamental messages which are crucial for the way we represent our principles and working methods.

- Non-partisan, independent and impartial humanitarian action must be possible regardless of the circumstances and of who controls what part of the territory. All parties have the same responsibilities and obligations with regard to the protection and support that must be given to such operations.
- The effectiveness of humanitarian action can and must be assessed only on a factual basis: are humanitarian agencies in a position to gain access, in satisfactory security conditions, to communities and groups in need and to provide them with the necessary assistance and protection?

Above all we must avoid such wording as “the return of humanitarian workers after the retreat of the Taliban” or “the resumption of humanitarian activities”. We must say and continue to reaffirm that the ICRC was present and active all the time, throughout Afghanistan, which is not only true but quite remarkable. However, access to some communities outside urban areas and some groups (prisoners) was restricted, and we are eager to see changes in this respect with the increased mobility of our teams and the return of international staff, which might facilitate the ICRC’s protection activities.

The (Afghan) acting head of the ICRC delegation in Kabul stated the position very convincingly when he said that the ICRC’s Afghan staff felt alone when the expatriates left, because, as he put it, “we work in teams and the teams were divided”. However, they combined their efforts and did all they could to help their community. He said they felt proud to be a symbol of unity at a time when their country was once again divided by strife. This is a powerful message and we trust it will be widely heeded.

**ICRC MEDIA SERVICES**

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