

## REPORTS AND DOCUMENTS

# Humanitarian diplomacy and principled humanitarian action

Speech given by Mr Peter Maurer,  
President of the International Committee of the  
Red Cross,  
Maison de la Paix, Geneva, 2 October 2014

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*The following speech was given by the President of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Peter Maurer, on 2 October 2014 at the Maison de la Paix in Geneva during a conference organized by the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. Maurer recalled the continued relevance and importance of the humanitarian principles and warned that a lack of common understanding, as well as politicized uses of the principles, jeopardizes the scope and scale of humanitarian action. The speech launched the ICRC's Second Research and Debate Cycle on Principles Guiding Humanitarian Action. Throughout 2015 – the year of the 50th anniversary of the adoption of the Fundamental Principles of the Red Cross and Red Movement (the Movement) and of the 32nd International Conference of the Movement, and leading to the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 – the Research and Debate Cycle has gathered key actors in the humanitarian field during public events and high-level conferences.<sup>1</sup> These events have encouraged substantive discussions on the principles among experts from the Movement, the humanitarian, governmental and academic fields, and other informed participants.*

This is an important moment on the eve of the launch of the Maison de la Paix<sup>2</sup> in Geneva on 3 October 2014. Peace deserves a home and there is hardly a better place than Geneva to offer this hospitality to all those who promote peace. It is even better to know that tonight is just the beginning of a series of conferences leading to the 32nd International Conference of the Red Cross and

Red Crescent Movement in 2015 and during which various presenters will offer their perspectives on critical humanitarian issues.

For over 200 years, Geneva has been at the crossroads of humanitarianism and international peace efforts, starting with Charles Pictet de Rochemont in early 1800 as one of the main architects of today's Europe, and Henry Dunant as the founder of today's Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Peace and humanitarian policies elaborated here do resonate across the globe. There are no other locations where one can understand better the interdependence and specificities of the various domains related to the international response to humanitarian crises. International Geneva is the privileged host of a number of specialized humanitarian agencies and organizations: it embodies the importance of promoting a coherent response to today's international challenges, and of preserving the professional integrity of the respective domains of activities. It is also a place which underlines the tensions that may arise when the more aspirational agenda for peace encounters the aspiration to preserve a minimum of humanity in war – but I will discuss this later.

The topic of today's discussion is humanitarian diplomacy and principled action at the crossroads, and I would like to reflect on the relevance of humanitarian principles in guiding today's international response to armed conflict.

Let me just set the stage first by situating the discussion. Over US\$20 billion are invested each year in responding to the essential needs of populations affected by humanitarian crises, including natural disasters, armed conflicts and other similar situations of violence. An estimated 250,000 humanitarian workers are engaged in these operations, many of which take place in highly hazardous environments, such as Ukraine, Syria/Iraq, South Sudan, the Central African Republic [CAR], Eastern Congo and now Liberia, with the latest Ebola pandemic. Relief and protection programmes in favour of these affected populations are guided by humanitarian principles building on the century-old experience of humanitarian professionals and distinguishing the humanitarian response from purely political on the one side, and charitable activities on the other, and providing a framework to deal with some of the most sensitive dilemmas with which we can be confronted in the real world of conflict.

What are those dilemmas? Dilemmas of priority-setting in situations of overwhelming needs and limited resources; dilemmas between fulfilling our commitment to humanity and taking into account the stark realities of power, injustice and discrimination in many areas of operations; between access to populations and security and safety of humanitarian personnel, and many more dilemmas.

Several guiding principles have emerged over the recent years, including the ones of accountability and participation of beneficiaries, the “do no harm” principle

- 1 For more information on the Second Research and Debate Cycle and to watch the recordings of some of the events, see: [www.icrc.org/en/cycle-principles](http://www.icrc.org/en/cycle-principles) (all internet references were accessed in October 2015).
- 2 Editor's note: The Maison de la Paix (House of Peace) is the main building of the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies in Geneva and also hosts other organizations working on international issues. For more information, see: <http://graduateinstitute.ch/maisondelapaix>.

and the quest for sustainability of relief efforts. None of them has matched the historical importance of the principles of humanity, impartiality, neutrality and independence, which are at the centre of the International Committee of the Red Cross's [ICRC] mission and identity, and which remain uncontested in the broader international community. These principles belong to the fundamentals of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. They were also the main sources of inspiration of the Guiding Principles of the United Nations action of UNGA Resolution 46/182, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1991. They have been at the heart of all major humanitarian operations for over a century.

And yet, questions arise today about their relevance in addressing new and emerging challenges in a broadening humanitarian agenda:

What are those challenges? Look at the prolonged nature of some of the current conflicts – Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Colombia or Sudan – and prolonged situations of occupation – like Palestine or Gaza – leading to a disintegration of State infrastructures. It is the disintegration of State infrastructure that affects the ability of public authorities to deliver basic services like health, education, nutrition, water and sanitation, or law and order. Most of the priority conflicts of today have been on top of the ICRC agenda for decades, while humanitarian action and principles were first and foremost developed to respond to a temporary crisis.

Look at the superposition of different factors weakening States and society: poverty, armed conflict, inter-communal violence and crime, undermining fragile States and societies, as we witness today in the CAR, Somalia and Yemen.

Look at the prevalent character of warfare, which is mostly affecting densely populated areas, leading to mass destructions and mass displacements. Where are the battlefields today? In Gaza, Lugansk, Aleppo, Bentiu and Gao, and in many other densely populated areas where millions of people live.

Look at the changing character of non-State armed groups carrying increasingly radical ideologies – feeding on corruption, exclusion and injustices under which populations have suffered for decades – and opposing today through their behaviour and through their words and ideas some of the most basic humanitarian values, as has been illustrated almost every day.

Look at the current dynamic of these de-structured and unstructured conflicts with effects of hostilities across entire regions and the displacement of large parts of the affected populations. What started as the Syrian crisis in 2011 is today a regional breakdown of systems with global and long-term effects. Even more so, the countries of the Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa have become a big regional and global area of instability.

We are thus confronted today with transforming vulnerabilities of populations and needs beyond the traditional scope of humanitarian action, like food, water, shelter and medicine. We see patterns of sexual violence emerge, calling for psychosocial responses; we see massive traumas of displaced populations needing more than war surgery as a response; we see children displaced in masses and demanding educational facilities and programmes as a

core expectation to humanitarian actors. So we are far beyond the definition of humanitarian action as a core survival of livelihoods.

In short, we are witnessing the broadening of the humanitarian response, or in other words, an increasing number of activities that fall under the category of humanitarian action today.

In response to these challenges, the international community has mobilized its energies not only to address the immediate consequences of these emergencies on populations, but also to deal with their causes and prevent their resurgence in a more consistent and coherent manner. It has set up monitoring mechanisms, in the Security Council and the Human Rights Council, to gather information on evolving situations of concern and vulnerabilities; it has developed regional and international peace-making and enforcing capabilities, equipped, like peacekeeping operations recently, with enforcement and protection mandates; it has fostered development programmes for conflict-affected populations – no development agency today would lack a conflict prevention division; and it has renewed its attempts to bring perpetrators of violence to justice, with the special tribunals and the International Criminal Court. In doing so, the international community has integrated the traditional emergency response and humanitarian action into a complex architecture of developmental, security, political and judiciary programmes drawing from various legal regimes – international humanitarian law, human rights law, refugee law, criminal law – making reference to international as well as national and regional jurisdictions. Since the Millennium Summit in the year 2000, the international community has to a large extent embraced and concretized the concept of an integrated, comprehensive and holistic approach to crises, and to conflict and underdevelopment.

While we at the ICRC certainly recognize the significance of greater integration of international programmes in the international community's strategy in contemporary crises, we also wonder about the specific role of humanitarianism in today's national and international response to such complex emergencies. There is a growing tension between the international efforts aimed at finding sustainable political solutions to ongoing crises on the one hand, and offering life-saving support to the most vulnerable populations according to strict requirements of impartiality and neutrality.

While the two objectives can be combined in practice, there are situations, such as Syria or Ukraine, where providing life-saving assistance to affected populations has been subjugated to political manoeuvrings of the parties. We have witnessed in Geneva 1 and 2 on Syria how the impossibility of addressing the political causes of the conflict has brought the UN and regional mediators to negotiate humanitarian access to besieged areas against larger political agendas, or as a first step of confidence-building in a transition process.

The signal was thus given to the parties to conflict, willing or unwilling, that humanitarian requirements were not obligations to follow as a matter of principle and practice, but rather issues to negotiate in the context of an overall political settlement. The same applies to the negotiations of relief convoys in Ukraine, facing at times incompressible political obstacles from all sides due to the

inability of all parties concerned to maintain a minimum of shared responsibility for the assistance and protection of over a million civilians affected by the armed conflict.

Connecting humanitarian and political negotiations in this way inevitably hijacks life-saving operations and impacts negatively on the credibility of international humanitarian actors. This is the reason why the ICRC, in Syria, Ukraine and elsewhere, is tirelessly offering credible alternatives to such situations, and which are compatible with fundamental humanitarian principles and implementable in practice. What does it mean? It means that defining precise modalities for access, control of goods, transparency of procedures of distribution, and creating confidence through proximity are all critical in our actions towards deploying neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action.

I am proud that my colleagues in Syria, Ukraine, Iraq, South Sudan and many other places are continuously managing to find pragmatic solutions inspired by humanitarian principles to overcome such obstacles. The ICRC is present today in all parts of Ukraine, doing cross-line in Syria, assisting those many times displaced in the most remote places of South Sudan and Yemen, and chartering its way in some of the most difficult environments in Iraq.

The ICRC has at heart its historic contribution in the elaboration of the principles to guide the deployment of international assistance and protection programmes. These principles have been codified to a large extent in international humanitarian law. They emerged from a long humanitarian tradition of preserving the life and dignity of all those affected by armed conflicts, without any distinction towards the sick and wounded in the battlefield, prisoners of war and security detainees, as well as the civilians caught in the crossfire. Whoever wishes to brush up on their knowledge should visit the Red Cross Museum, which illustrates the emergence of humanitarian principles through history and cultures. It is important to remind ourselves – as these principles are questioned by too many today – that humanitarian principles are not the emanation of Western values but are deeply rooted in different cultures. In an open letter to the head of Islamic State, Islamic scholars of all currents of belief have illustrated how deeply rooted some fundamental humanitarian principles are in Islamic tradition and doctrine, and how far away from these principles the behaviour of extremist groups today is.<sup>3</sup>

These principles have also been shaped by practice over several decades. Humanitarian activities often take place in contested areas governed by loose coalitions of State and non-State entities. The ICRC's diplomacy of access is based on a continued process of negotiation to set its presence in these areas, maintain proximity to the affected people and communities, and seek the consent of the relevant parties to allow humanitarian operations to take place. This is, as everybody knows, a risky and often very frustrating, long process: we negotiated for months a cross-line operation in Aleppo, a license to operate in Sudan, minimal security guarantees for our field operations in Afghanistan, and many

3 Editor's note: The open letter is available at: [www.lettertobaghdadi.com](http://www.lettertobaghdadi.com).

more examples. Because of the lack of progress in such negotiations, very often populations are unattended, suffering or dying.

Our experience illustrates that the maintenance of a space of “shared humanity” that can resist the temptation of politicizing or militarizing relief efforts is not a concept spontaneously shared by everybody. In a period where polarization, extremism, demonization and stigmatization are widespread and affecting body politics in many countries, and not only in remote areas, the notion of shared responsibility of all belligerents for a humanitarian space in which civilians are protected and prisoners treated humanely is not an easy sell.

Just pass in front of your eyes for a second the pictures from the recent ICRC exhibition in the Musée Rath,<sup>4</sup> where prisoners of war are shown playing cards in leisurely guarded environments during the First World War, and compare them to the practice and rhetoric of today. I am sure you will agree that this does not look like progress of civilization or a reaffirmation of humanitarian space.

A key characteristic of this space is that all actors have the same roles and responsibilities in ensuring the assistance and protection of vulnerable populations. The failure of one party does not discharge the others from their duty. Equally, humanitarian assistance and protection is not the prerogative of a single party, State, non-State or multilateral organization. Through the presence and support of a neutral and independent organization such as the ICRC, the parties are able to preserve this space despite political tensions, and to consider regulating the effects of hostilities on populations.

The concepts as well as the practices of principled humanitarian action are increasingly being challenged in current conflicts. Parties to conflict themselves may explicitly desist from this project of shared humanity for ideological or political reasons, as witnessed in several instances over the recent years, when the so-called “enemy population” has been wholly and collectively dehumanized and degraded. The persistent demand to humanitarians on whether aid beneficiaries are in government or opposition-controlled areas reflects the same dangerous trend of designing programmes according to political orientations of populations and not to needs.

The legitimacy of principled humanitarian action is also being challenged in a more paradoxical way by a number of national and international actors who purposefully mix essential emergency programmes with political, security, developmental or otherwise transformative goals. We see an increasing number of programmes and donor criteria which expect humanitarian actors not only to cover humanitarian needs, but also to lay the ground for gender equality, social equity and sustainable development. While the integration of relief and assistance

4 Editor’s note: This is an art and history museum in Geneva, which served as the headquarters of the International Prisoners-of-War Agency set up by the ICRC in 1914 to centralize information about, and organize the dispatch of relief parcels to, prisoners of war during the First World War. In 2013, to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the ICRC, the Musée Rath organized an exhibition entitled “Humanizing War?”, illustrating key moments in the evolution of warfare and the history of the organization.

activities into such transformative agendas provides significant benefits in terms of sustained developmental goals or the promotion of human rights, it definitely comes at a cost: at the cost of politicizing the shared space of humanity, at the cost of marginalizing or even antagonizing parties, and at the cost of restraining avenues of collaboration and engagement.

Together all these elements come at a heavy price of hindering access to the populations in need.

The debate here is not one of principles, but one about pragmatism. The ICRC has learned along its history that the implementation of its humanitarian mission will require contextual balance of interest regarding its neutrality, its independence and even in some cases its impartiality. While it will never negotiate on its core goals of preserving the life and dignity of everyone affected by conflicts and similar situations of violence, it is dedicated to engaging in all confidentiality with all the parties to discuss and accommodate, as far as possible, other political, social and security constraints. It remains pragmatic and does not take sides on these or any other aspects of the conflict. It ensures that the experience and professionalism of its staff relentlessly negotiates the best possible deal in specific circumstances and at a given moment to maintain a space for humanity. This, again, is not an issue of abstract principles; it is an issue of pragmatic solutions inspired by principles.

The required debate today on pragmatism is very frankly not coming so much from the ICRC or other principled organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières, but from the side of NGOs, multi-mandated agencies, donor governments and international actors that have vowed to serve both the humanitarian needs of affected populations and the transformation agendas of the international community. In theory, we all share the same aspirations for global peace, development and security, as well as the understanding about the limits of humanitarian action in addressing or preventing the causes of crisis. In practice, however, our experience shows that emergency access to vulnerable populations in some of the most contested areas depends on the ability to isolate humanitarian goals from other transformative goals, be they economic, political, social or human rights-related. A specific pragmatism is required to operate in these areas – from Syria to Yemen, from Mali to Myanmar – that allows all the parties to recognize their shared humanity in the goals of the humanitarian organizations present on the ground. In the absence of this recognition and dialogue, our ability to intervene in favour of affected populations diminishes considerably.

There are evidently exceptions to this understanding. In situations where parties have persistently desisted from their humanitarian responsibility and denied access to the most vulnerable groups, different, more forceful approaches are required and explicitly regulated by the UN Charter. But this very clearly is no longer the area of humanitarian action, but of political action.

In many situations, however, the only way to access populations is to rely on seeking consent through dialogue and not coercion. Parties to conflict, State and non-State alike, need to see benevolent actors availing themselves to assist them in

implementing their humanitarian agendas. Such an approach does not prevent us from shaping and forming humanitarian action as a building block or a foundation for more ambitious response systems if such ambition is supported by a large consensus. But it imposes self-limitation first, and the ability to build and broaden consensus afterwards.

Let me make some concluding remarks. Emergency humanitarian response is and should remain a distinct professional domain from conflict resolution processes, development programming, stabilization efforts and the transformation of societies based on universal human rights. Principled humanitarian action and diplomacy is about the preservation of this neutral, impartial and independent space: an embodiment of our shared humanity that persists even in the most challenging circumstances of the armed conflicts and natural disasters of tomorrow.

But let me be very clear on this as well: distinct approaches do not mean unwillingness or inability to exchange, coordinate and cooperate. On the contrary, the distinct character of humanitarian action needs, in today's environment more than ever, tireless engagement to understand and define the interface between different actors and agendas, and a search for complementarity, coordination and cooperation where broad consensus allows.

In that sense, let me express my hope that the 32nd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in 2015 and the subsequent World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 will not become remote islands on which humanitarian organizations and bureaucrats work through their predefined agendas and discourses. These are too serious times to engage in business as usual.

We need international gatherings that put the needs of people first and true engagement on how best to respond, and not only conversations amongst humanitarian organizations. We need to have a serious and forward-looking debate and hopefully reach some understanding on how humanitarian action relates to the broader international agenda, how it interfaces with security, development, human rights and peace aspirations, how we finance the growing needs equitably, and how we intertwine local, regional and global efforts in a more creative way. With a series of international gatherings in 2015 – from revisiting the Hyogo Framework for Action and the Millennium Development Goals, to the Red Cross and Red Crescent Conference and the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016 – the field is wide open to find a better deal for people in need.