

PERSPECTIVES ON THE ICRC

The indispensable organization



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Before joining the European Commission in February 2010, Commissioner Georgieva held various positions at the World Bank as Environmental Economist, then Senior Environmental Economist, and as Sector Manager on Environment for the East Asia and Pacific Region. From 2000 to 2004 she was Director in charge of World Bank environmental strategy, policies, and lending, and in 2004 became World Bank Director for the Russian Federation. From 2007 to 2008 she held the position of Director for Sustainable Development and was appointed Vice President and Corporate Secretary of the World Bank Group.

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If war is one of humanity's worst and most unnatural urges, then compassion and solidarity are war's most effective and self-sustaining antidotes. Since its birth 150 years ago as a humane reaction to inhumane suffering caused by the Battle of Solferino, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has stood as a proud symbol of this compassion and solidarity.

And today, as we commemorate this 150th anniversary, we are called upon to recognize why the ICRC came to be, to celebrate its achievements, to pay tribute to its people, and to reflect on the challenges that will define it in the future.

As Europe's Commissioner for International Cooperation, Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Response, I have many opportunities to see the ICRC in action. Wherever I go, in the globe's darkest pockets of despair, in the hottest beds of war, in the squalid arenas of protracted conflicts, I endeavour to meet ICRC delegates. I am always impressed by the honesty and lucidity of their assessment, by their dedication, by their professionalism.

My first field experience of the indispensability of the ICRC was in Osh, a city in southern Kyrgyzstan. I travelled there in the summer of 2010, early in my mandate as European Commissioner, to assess the humanitarian needs triggered by the surge of ethnic unrest and to deliver European assistance. As in so many other conflicts, ICRC delegates had been first on the ground and as I arrived they were busy in their life-saving work: treating the wounded and bringing food and water to the families and communities affected by the clashes. Bullets were whistling in the distance as I was meeting residents of Osh and, understandably, there was a lot of fear among them. ‘Europe’s aid is very important for us right now, but equally important is that they are here’, a local woman told me, pointing at the people wearing the Red Cross-emblazoned vests. ‘Except for everything else they’re doing, their very presence protects us. We need them here’, she said. In today’s world of ever-unpredictable conflicts and complex crises, we need them more than ever.

Remarkable service to humanity

And the needs are expanding, together with the fragility of our world. Climate change, population growth, urbanization, relocation of wars from battlefields to civilian dwellings – these factors are increasing both the frequency and the severity of humanitarian crises. The number of affected people is also rising, and, tragically, the poorest people are most likely to be affected first and hit the worst.

It is for these people, more than anything else, that the ICRC exists today and it is unrivalled in its commitment and capacity to reach them with life-saving aid and protection, with consolation, with the hope that they so badly need. The ICRC’s wide-ranging activities in conflict areas and its close proximity to the people who need help enable it to respond effectively – and often simultaneously – to a wide range of unfolding crises: from sudden onset violence like Syria since last year, or Libya the year before, to protracted crises like Yemen, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.

Advocacy through action

The operational abilities of the ICRC are impressive on all fronts: medical care, food distribution, bringing water, sanitation, livelihood support, visits to detainees, restoring contact between people separated by violence or disasters. But equally important are the values the ICRC embodies better than any other organization. It is thanks to their dedication to international humanitarian law, their adherence to the principles of neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian aid that ICRC workers are able to do their job – often in places where no other relief agencies are allowed. To realize how unique this asset is, just consider war-torn Somalia, where the United Nations declared famine in the summer of 2011 at a time when the Al-Shabbab militia banished most relief workers from large parts of the country. There, in the areas worst hit by hunger, only the ICRC was allowed to bring food to hundreds of thousands of Somali on the verge of death. It was allowed because it was seen as

neutral and built bonds with local communities; and also because even militiamen, knowing no law but that of the gun, recognized ICRC workers as impartial and allowed them do their job.

This dedication to humanitarian principles as a practical and a moral imperative has often made me think of the ICRC as the conscience of the humanitarian community. Equally impressive is how the ICRC manages to stay focused on the principles although they are being applied in an ever-changing environment where mercenaries, asymmetric conflict, extremism, and terror are new factors piling new challenges on top of traditional ones.

This is why, when faced with tough decisions in my first years as Europe's humanitarian commissioner, my first call has often been to Jakob Kellenberger. Now it is to his successor, the current President of the ICRC Peter Maurer.

Bond on operations and on principles

I rely on their honest advice and sense of perspective because of the strong bond between the ICRC and the European Commission's Humanitarian Aid Department, ECHO. We work with the ICRC in many of the hottest spots on our planet. But as important as our operational bond is, our bond on principles is equally strong. Thanks to this, I can make sure that Europe's solidarity aids the victims of conflicts in the best possible way.

Thinking about our bonds on the humanitarian principles, I remember Yemen, a country where hundreds of thousands of internally displaced people have been inaccessible for humanitarian workers due to insecurity and the frequent clashes between the Houthi rebels and the government. Antonio Guterres, the United Nation High Commissioner for Refugees, and I secured a meeting with the Houthi commanders and managed to convince these big men with big beards and big guns to grant the ICRC access to the territories they control. This success had less to do with Antonio Guterres and I than it had to do with the ICRC – the Houthi commanders simply realized that ICRC delegates are not there to take sides, but to save lives. This is just an example of how the soft power of principles that the ICRC embodies so well can prevail over the hard power of weapons.

One of the most dangerous jobs in the world

For ICRC staff, saving lives often means putting their own lives on the line. In Yemen, but also in Somalia and Afghanistan, in Pakistan, Sudan, and most recently in Syria, humanitarian workers are targeted more and more often – shot at, kidnapped, murdered. This is alarming for the humanitarian community, but even worse for the people who need its help and who are cut off from it when ambulances are shot at and relief workers are deliberately targeted. Where there is danger, there is also suffering, and those who go there unarmed and with no agenda but to help are the real heroes of our world – although they are modest and rarely recognized.

They deserve our deep respect and any effort in advocacy, protection, and awareness that we can provide.

What's next?

The ICRC has a proud history and continues to live up to this track record in a difficult environment where the demands for its services are great, the challenges are varied, and the financial resources are scant. So tomorrow, this indispensable organisation will once again be put to the test.

The global financial and economic crisis has eroded the resilience of the poorest, increased their vulnerability, and made them more likely to rely on humanitarian aid. Needs are growing but all the while donor countries are struggling to return to growth and aid budgets are under pressure. This trend is unlikely to be reversed in the coming years, although I am proud that Europe is keeping its unwavering commitments as a humanitarian donor – and will remain a generous one. Yet, the risk is real that humanitarian organizations will have to reach out to more people but without more money. This raises questions about our ability to do our job as effectively as required – and the answer to these questions is aid efficiency: maximum value will need to be squeezed out of every cent we invest and of every operation we carry out. I have no doubt that the ICRC will keep doing that.

Along with the external constraints there are also challenges stemming from within the humanitarian community – an increasingly crowded environment where traditional donors interact with new, emerging ones and where the proliferation of organizations large and small, local and international, often complicates coordination, and where some actors use humanitarian objectives as a pretext to pursue political, military, or economic ones. This creates risks for the security of humanitarian staff in the field as well as risks for genuine humanitarians to be sidestepped by state actors, armies, or interest groups. In the face of these dangers, the ICRC will again be indispensable, as the guardian of the humanitarian principles – engaging, educating, and advocating that neutrality, independence, and human impartiality remain the common denominator among all humanitarians.

Our world will continue to be fragile and a particularly worrying trend is that the places around the world that are particularly vulnerable to climate change and natural disasters are also vulnerable to conflicts – the Horn of Africa, the Sahel, Yemen, parts of Southeast Asia. This explosive cocktail piles new and unpredictable problems and requires new solutions, adequate to the fast-changing reality. One of these solutions is the investment in resilience – an example of smart aid that supports communities to cope better with recurrent disasters and enables people to help themselves. An important aspect of effective investment in resilience is to build stronger bridges between humanitarian and development aid. This is a big priority for the European Commission and yet another area where we and the ICRC are working towards the same goal. This is only natural: we cannot stop the climate from changing or wars from erupting but we can do something about how people react to these disasters, about reducing their vulnerability and increasing their

chances of recovery and development in spite of all the difficulties. This is why the potential for resilience-building is huge – and one of the most important callings to us in the humanitarian community. I have no doubt that in this, as well, the ICRC will lead by its example.

Through our long and painful history of wars, Europe has learned the difficult lesson of living in peace. We see it as our obligation to spread the values of peace to all corners of the world, where people can only dream about it. We are proud of our track record in this respect – and have proudly joined the ICRC among the winners of the Nobel Peace Prize. The goals we share are the best of all – to serve humanity and to do it with no other agenda but that of saving lives and alleviating pain and suffering.