

PERSPECTIVES ON THE ICRC



The ICRC and the changing humanitarian landscape

Ban Ki-moon, Secretary-General of the United Nations

Ban Ki-moon is the eighth Secretary-General of the United Nations. He received his Bachelor's degree in International Relations from Seoul National University and a Master's degree in Public Administration from the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. At the time of his election as Secretary-General, Mr Ban was his country's Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade. His thirty-seven years of service with the Ministry included postings in New Delhi, Washington D.C., and Vienna, and responsibility for a variety of portfolios, including Foreign Policy Adviser to the President, Chief National Security Adviser to the President, Deputy Minister for Policy Planning, and Director-General of American Affairs. Mr Ban took office on 1 January 2007. He was unanimously re-elected by the General Assembly in June 2011 and will continue to serve until December 2016.

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We at the United Nations have the highest regard for the work and role of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). My own life was touched in a formative way by the Red Cross spirit, if not the ICRC specifically. Growing up in the war-torn Republic of Korea, I benefitted from the life-saving international aid brought into the country by those wearing 'UN blue' and by the men and women bearing the iconic red symbol of the Red Cross movement. My first travel abroad, as a high school student, was sponsored by the Red Cross and it transformed my views

of the world and my place in it. I was so moved by these expressions of global solidarity that I eventually chose to pursue my own career in international public service.

Today, as the ICRC marks its 150th anniversary, there is much to admire, and not simply its longevity.

First, there is the ICRC's ability to rapidly deploy and maintain a presence in situations of armed conflict and violence throughout the world. That includes places, remote or otherwise, where United Nations and other humanitarian actors may be unable to be present and where the ICRC may offer the only hope of survival for people in need of protection and assistance.

Second, there is the scope of activities that the ICRC undertakes, central to which is the notion that protection and assistance are two sides of the same coin. Some are unique to the ICRC, in particular its mandated role to promote and act as guardian of international humanitarian law. Others are complementary to those carried out by the United Nations family and its humanitarian, human rights, and development actors. These include protecting civilians; visiting detainees; reuniting families; ensuring access to medical care, water, food, and essential household items; and running programmes for sustainable food production and micro-economic initiatives.

Third, there is the professionalism and dedication of its staff, which extends to the global network of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Tragically, the ICRC has not been immune from the violence that has increasingly plagued humanitarian work, with too many brave colleagues making the ultimate sacrifice as they sought to help others.

Fourth, there is the ICRC's steadfast commitment to principled humanitarian action – to humanitarian action that is neutral, independent, and impartial: neutral in seeking to establish and maintain dialogue with all parties to conflict while not remaining indifferent in the face of violations of international humanitarian law; independent in being free from any political or military agendas; and impartial in that the ICRC's work benefits people without discrimination as to their race, origin, sex, religion, etc., and is prioritized on need and need alone. Talk to any ICRC delegate in the field and they will tell you the same thing: principled humanitarian action is the foundation of the ICRC's success in reaching people and gaining acceptance by state and non-state parties to conflict. Without acceptance, humanitarians do not have access. And without access, their ability to help those in need is severely constrained if not precluded altogether.

A fifth reason for which to admire the ICRC is its adaptability. This dynamism will be ever more necessary in the future, as the changing nature of conflict and violence, and of the humanitarian response system itself, will continue to pose new challenges.

A defining feature of many contemporary conflicts is the failure of the parties to respect international humanitarian law. Overcoming flagrant violations of the law is made all the more difficult by the proliferation and fragmentation of non-state armed groups and the increasingly asymmetric nature of conflict. This has had a profoundly negative impact on civilians, as some armed groups have sought to

overcome their military inferiority by attacking civilians and using civilians to shield military objectives. The risks for civilians are further heightened as militarily superior parties, in fighting an enemy that can be difficult to identify, may respond with methods and means of warfare that may violate the principles of distinction and proportionality, and civilians again bear the brunt.

Against this backdrop it is vital that ICRC delegates continue to engage parties to conflict. Beyond this, the ICRC also plays a critical role in promoting reflection and discussion with states and other relevant actors to clarify the understanding and interpretation of the law. This role will remain important given the need for open and collective analysis and debate on emerging issues such as the use of explosive weapons in densely populated areas and the development of new weapons technologies.

Just as the nature of conflict has changed dramatically through the course of the ICRC's 150 years, so too has the nature of the actors involved in responding to the emergency needs that conflicts create. While the ICRC is possibly the oldest international humanitarian organization, it is not the only one. The United Nations and other humanitarian organizations, including a significant number of national and international non-governmental organizations, play a long-established and crucial role in responding to humanitarian crises and providing protection and assistance.

Increasingly, a range of other actors, including from the military and private sectors, have entered the emergency response domain. While they have brought new and additional capacities, they also have ways of working that can be different from traditional approaches and are not always based on the humanitarian principles of neutrality, independence, and impartiality.

Peacekeeping missions have come to play a vital and complex role in emergency settings. They are increasingly authorized by the Security Council to protect civilians, bringing to bear a unique combination of civilian, military, and police capacities. They are often mandated to help establish the security environment needed for others to deliver humanitarian assistance. In addition, missions may undertake protection activities, involving child protection and protection from sexual violence, that complement those carried out by humanitarian actors. While peacekeeping missions mandated to protect civilians unquestionably provide an important service in enhancing safety and reducing casualties, traditional humanitarian actors have valid concerns that their access and security may be undermined if they are perceived by belligerents or segments of the population as aligned to the political objectives of such missions. The ICRC has repeatedly underlined that the distinct roles of the various actors involved in protection must be understood and respected – advice that the United Nations incorporates in its decisions on integration in mission settings. The ICRC has developed constructive relations with peacekeeping missions deployed in contexts where it is active. Its delegations reach out to troop- and police-contributing countries in their own capitals to train and brief peacekeepers before they leave. At headquarters, an institutional dialogue and regular contacts link the ICRC to the Department for Peacekeeping Operations.

As part of my action agenda for my second term as Secretary-General, I am focusing on strengthening the humanitarian system so that all partners can find ways to better respond to armed conflict, natural and man-made disasters and other emergencies. I very much look forward to the constructive engagement of the ICRC at the World Humanitarian Summit I plan to convene in 2015.

I commend the ICRC for faithfully fulfilling its role as guardian of international humanitarian law and maintaining its commitment to principled humanitarian action. The United Nations looks forward to building on an already strong partnership so that we can serve all those who turn to us for protection and assistance in their time of dire need.