

Humanitarian security: “a matter of acceptance, perception, behaviour...”

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At a meeting in Geneva (31.03.04) ICRC operations director Pierre Krähenbühl outlined the organization’s view of current threats to humanitarian work in conflict zones and reaffirmed its commitment to the principles of impartiality, independence and neutrality.

Address given at the High-level Humanitarian Forum

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The year 2003 has undoubtedly been a difficult – and often dramatic – one for the conduct of humanitarian operations. There were threats and attacks deliberately targeting aid organizations and their personnel, something that has raised questions about the ability of these organizations to fulfil their mandate and generated a debate around the future of humanitarian action. There are important stakes in this debate for the ICRC and we would like to share some thoughts and indications about how the ICRC assesses these developments and how it plans to address some of their most significant implications.

Evolving environments

Conflict environments in today’s world continue to be highly diverse in terms of causes, characteristics and typologies. At a global level, we note a renewed polarisation or radicalisation. This polarisation has taken on different forms but the one that is affecting the conflict environments most notably is the confrontation taking place between a number of states engaged in what has become known as the “fight against terrorism” and a series of radical non-state actors determined to oppose them and prepared to resort to the use of non-conventional methods which include attacks of deliberate terror against civilians and so-called soft targets, for example humanitarian organizations.

While a number of individual contexts are affected by these global trends, local causes remain predominant

in assessing reasons for conflicts in many other parts of the globe: economic, social, health and other related issues.

Implications for security

Carrying out humanitarian activities in zones of armed conflict or internal violence has always been a dangerous undertaking. The ICRC currently has 10,000 staff members working in 75 countries. At every moment of the day they travel to areas that have seen fighting occur or cross front lines between opposing parties. They meet, negotiate or deal with the whole range of different arms carriers: from military to police, paramilitary to rebel, child soldier to mercenary.

Security of personnel and beneficiaries alike amounts to a crucial institutional responsibility: while working in contexts of armed conflict or situations of violence evidently implies being confronted with significant levels of risk, the ICRC has always sought to develop approaches and instruments of security management that limit, to the largest possible extent, exposure to such risks.

The “classic” security environment is commonly described as one where the main risk is of finding oneself at the wrong moment in the wrong place. It is worth noting – as we discuss some of the new features in terms of risks – that this type of security environment remains in the experience of the ICRC by far the most widespread in the world today.

This being said, in 2003, the ICRC was the victim of a series of deliberate attacks that claimed the lives of four colleagues in Afghanistan and Iraq. A fifth colleague was caught in cross-fire and killed in Baghdad. Several other organizations among which the Afghan Red Crescent Society, the UN family and NGOs suffered similar tragic losses.

While two out of the three deliberate attacks, specifically those north of Kandahar in March and south of Baghdad in July, appear to have been the result of an apparent association of the ICRC’s presence with the broader international political and military action in the contexts, the October car-bomb attack against the ICRC offices in Baghdad was a direct and planned targeting of the organization.

Was this a new element? Not specifically: being deliberately targeted in a given context has happened before. [...]

Therefore, what is new today? From an ICRC perspective, what is new in the present context is the global nature of the threat, the fact that it is not geographically circumscribed. The ICRC’s security concept was defined as an essentially context-based approach. A given delegation in the field evaluates its security environment on the basis of a series of institutional indicators – we call them our security pillars – among which acceptability figures prominently.

Today however, those indicators may appear favourable in a given context and actors coming from the outside could nevertheless target our staff.

A complicating factor is the fact that access to the groups carrying out these attacks is at present very difficult when not outright impossible. Yet for the ICRC, dialogue with all actors involved in or affecting the outcome of a given situation of conflict is a vitally important part of our operating procedures. Without such dialogue, it is impossible to achieve required levels of acceptability and thus impossible to reach populations at risk to carry out our protection and assistance activities.

In a polarised environment furthermore, there are expectations that any actor ought to take sides. One is friend or foe, ally or enemy. This makes it all the more complex for actors, such as the ICRC, who invoke principles of independence and neutrality, to get their message across. From this results a heightened question of perception of the legitimacy of humanitarian action and in particular of the ICRC's neutral and independent way of operating.

This development entails two specific risks: **that of being rejected and that of being instrumentalised.**

It appears at present that any actor seen in one way or another to be contributing to the stabilization or transition efforts in Afghanistan or to the occupation of Iraq is potentially at risk. Since in addition the ICRC's identity is perceived in some circles as mainly Western – because of our funding, our emblem, our headquarters – the risk of being mistaken for an integral part of the broader political and military presence is high.

Regardless of what the motives might have been the ICRC has strongly condemned these attacks against its staff, which seriously affect its ability to provide protection and assistance to the extent required by the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Another element of risk is that of being instrumentalised, in other words the risk of integration by some state actors of humanitarian action into the range of tools available to them in the conduct of their campaign against terrorist activities. A variety of expressions thereof have been noted in recent months. They include statements by some governments describing their military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan as “mainly humanitarian”. The establishment of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) concept by the international forces in Afghanistan is another example. The ensuing blurring of lines between the role and objectives of political and military actors on the one hand and humanitarian actors on the other creates serious perception and operational problems for an organization such as the ICRC.

ICRC response

How does the ICRC intend to address some the most pressing implications of the developments? I would like in responding to this question to share with you some of our current thinking and respond to certain of the

ideas raised in the discussion paper submitted to us by OCHA for this meeting.

The ICRC security management concept is based on some of the following central parameters:

- The ICRC has a largely decentralised and bottom-up management culture. This applies equally to security management. The strong belief is that the closer one is to populations at risk, the better one is placed to analyse events and formulate strategies.
- To remain effective, this broad field autonomy has to unfold within clearly defined institutional frameworks: our mandate, principles and security concept.
- The ICRC approach to security management is that responsibility lies with the operational managers themselves. There is no separation between security management and operational management. [...]
- When the security unit attached to the department of operations was established at headquarters ten years ago, a central pre-condition set by operational field managers was that responsibility for security management would not be removed from them. In that sense, the security unit has more of a watchdog function and focuses mainly on overall policy development, monitoring, support and training.
- The ICRC is also convinced that security – long-before becoming an issue of physical protection – is a matter of acceptance, perception of the organization, individual behaviour of a delegate and ability to listen, communicate and project a consistent and coherent image to all actors involved in a conflict. In other words, of being predictable: be seen to be doing what one says.

How does the earlier-described changing environment impact on this overall ICRC approach?

- In the face of tragedies such as last year's one could be tempted to further centralize decision-making at headquarters. The ICRC is convinced that it must maintain a decentralized approach.
- It needs to integrate the global nature of the threat, in other words the security management concept has to include approaches that can raise awareness and levels of preparedness for dangers that may develop beyond the borders of a given context and yet affect it.
- This also requires new ways of communicating with the different parties to a given situation. Meaning in particular to find ways of communication with those who may misunderstand or reject us today.
- It also means making a strong stand for neutral and independent humanitarian action. Old recipes for a different world? Not in our view certainly. Quite on the contrary a principled position maintained with conviction in the face of challenge.

Arguably, what the ICRC needs to be much more effective at are some of the following things:

- **improving the integration of national staff members into the security analysis and evaluation** carried out in respective contexts. [...] Similarly improving the dialogue on security with key national or local partners, such as our colleagues in National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies.
- **explaining why impartiality or independence matter, why neutrality is relevant:**

Impartiality, we understand very simply as meaning that humanitarian action should benefit people regardless of their origin, race, gender, faith, etc. In that sense, no one should be deprived of assistance or protection because of what he or she believes in. [...]

Independence, we see as implying that our humanitarian action needs to be distinct – and perceived as so – from political decision-making processes. The reason for this is straightforward: in any conflict, parties will tend to reject humanitarian actors they suspect of having ulterior political motives.

This explains – and does not come as a surprise to you – why we are so adamant in our insistence in the respect for respective identities, mandates and operational approaches. This is something we are pleased to note as figuring prominently in the discussion paper.

However, different types of integrated approaches – combining political, military, reconstruction and humanitarian tools – advocated by the UN on the one hand and a number of states on the other in our view conflict with this principle and the ICRC cannot and will not subscribe to such policies.

In this regard we would like to underline our concern with the references in the OCHA discussion paper to a commitment to “common action” such as the “withdrawal of humanitarian presence... in areas where there is a pattern of gross violations”. While understanding the intended purpose, we have experienced situations where such approaches of conditionality – in Afghanistan and Iraq for example saw populations abandoned under the pretext that a party, which the international community sought to ostracise or isolate, controlled them.

Neutrality is not always easy to make understood either. It is often taken for indifference. The ICRC is not neutral in the face of violations of international humanitarian law. What the ICRC does not do is take sides in a conflict or ascribe fault to one side or the other. We take a conflict as a fact and comment on the conduct of hostilities.

Neutrality is therefore a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is a tool to keep channels open for concrete action. We intend to keep the dialogue open with all parties; there are no actors yielding power over populations that we would refuse to talk to. We do not comment by that on their worthiness as interlocutors, nor do we thus grant them any particular status.

Advocacy for an independent and neutral humanitarian approach includes a claim to a clear distinction to be maintained between humanitarian action on the one hand and political-military action on the other. Not because the ICRC shies away from the military: to the contrary, we want and often have an active dialogue with them. Neither because we claim that there are not circumstances when other actors being incapable of fulfilling their missions – a military unit might be a last resort. We do on the other hand want to avoid the current blurring of lines produced by the characterisation of military “hearts and minds” campaigns or reconstruction efforts as humanitarian.

The ICRC has in that regard a problem with the Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan. Not in regard to the strictly speaking military or security objectives they have set for themselves. In keeping with our

neutrality, that is not a dimension we wish to comment on. We are however concerned because they integrate humanitarian responses into an overall military and security concept, in which responding to the needs of parts of the population can be a constituent part of a strategy to defeat an opponent or enemy. [...]

We realise that this might contribute to a feeling that the ICRC is once again keen to underline its “apartness”, that the world changes and the ICRC continues to insist on the same old recipes. Nothing is further from our mind. There are many very useful comments in the discussion paper, including illustrations of contradictions and weaknesses within the broader humanitarian community. The ICRC has nothing to be complacent about and is keen to learn from the experience of others.

We are in that sense genuinely determined to engage with all humanitarian actors and other stakeholders in a transparent dialogue on these issues, both in specific conflict situations where analysis and threat assessment sharing is often vital, and in more conceptual debates where progress can be achieved in understanding respective interpretations of humanitarian action.

We recognize fully that there are today many other definitions of humanitarian action than ours. We are not claiming that all other actors should or can agree to our definition and operational philosophy. We also recognize that there have been and may well be in the future situations where our approach fails to produce the expected results and others may have to step in.

We strongly believe on the other hand that we need to make our position well known: it is important that we be able to convey what we will be part of, i.e. dialogue, consultation and coordination with others and what we will not be part of, i.e. coordination or integration by others. We are determined to maintain our principled operational approach in place, believing that it remains effective and necessary.

Discussion

1.
 - a. What is the meaning of “humanitarian”? What constitutes humanitarian action? Which objectives does humanitarian action seek to achieve? What is the aim of peacekeeping? And of conflict resolution?
 - b. What relationship exists between humanitarian endeavour and political action? Must they be completely separate? Can they be? Is it really possible for humanitarian organizations to maintain independence within such a symbiotic relationship? What form should this relationship take?
 - c. Must humanitarian action necessarily be neutral and impartial? Why?

2.

- a. What risks to humanitarian organizations, their workers, and even the victims of conflict arise when humanitarian activities and political or military action become blurred?
 - b. Should military forces be engaged in humanitarian action? What are the risks and advantages of such an engagement?
 - c. Shouldn't humanitarian organizations benefit at least from military protection, particularly with the increasing use of violence against them? What are the risks of any armed protection? Against a party to the conflict? Against bandits? What is the difference between a party to the conflict and bandits? What if armed protection is the only way to reach the victims?
 - d. How would you explain this declining respect for humanitarian organizations? Does it stem from the fact that the types and nature of conflicts have changed? Or from an increase in peace operations? Or is it simply due to the lack of international commitment to peace efforts? Or finally, is it due to the great number of humanitarian organizations in the field?
3. How does the ICRC traditionally guarantee the security of its staff? Which of these methods are losing their efficiency because of which aspects of the present security environment?
- 4.
- a. Is there a direct correlation between the increased number of humanitarian organizations working during a conflict and more effective achievement of humanitarian goals? If so, why? How can greater complementarity and division of labour be achieved?
 - b. What are the advantages and risks for the ICRC and for the war victims of increased coordination between the humanitarian organizations in the field? If the coordination includes the ICRC and is initiated by the UN?
 - c. Who should be responsible for this coordination? Who is currently responsible?