

Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security
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Statement by Yves Daccord, ICRC Director of Communications

I thank you, Sir, for this opportunity to brief the Security Council today. The protection of civilians in armed conflict has been high on the international agenda for the past decade. On one level, progress has been impressive. Never before have there been so many policy statements and resolutions, so much global information and advocacy, and such a proliferation of actors professing to carry out protection work. Sadly, these fine words and good intentions are rarely matched by the reality on the ground. While there may still be diverging views on what protection actually is, there can be little doubt about what happens when there is no protection.

This is the reality facing the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in our daily work in far too many armed conflicts and other situations of violence around the world. The reality is that, in some places, men, women and children are being killed or raped, forced out of their homes, losing all their possessions and living in a state of fear. Hospitals are being bombed and health workers attacked. Beyond the deliberate targeting of civilians, the reality is also the countless numbers of other, often forgotten victims who are equally in need of protection. The reality is that in war people go missing. People have the right to know what happened to their missing relatives. Governments, military authorities and armed groups have an obligation to provide information and assist efforts to put families back together. In addition, the hundreds of thousands of people in prisons or detained in armed conflict must not be forgotten.

So why is the reality on the ground so often dismal compared to the progress in policy and doctrine? The fundamental reason is as obvious as it is challenging. It is the lack of respect for international humanitarian law by State and non-State actors. That, coupled with the prevailing culture of impunity, is the main cause of the human suffering we are witnessing. Various factors compound that challenge. The increase in non-State armed groups in some contexts is one. When armed actors are motivated by crime or banditry, it is harder to talk to them about their obligation to protect civilians. The constant evolution in the means and methods of warfare is another factor. Waging battle in densely populated urban areas, sometimes with highly explosive weapons, is just one example.

Yet despite, or rather because of, the flagrant violations committed by parties to conflict around the world, the ICRC firmly believes that the relevance and importance of international humanitarian law is reaffirmed, not weakened. That is echoed in the five core challenges in the Secretary-General's reports in 2009 (S/2009/277) and 2010 (S/2010/579) on the protection of civilians.

Working to ensure respect for international humanitarian law in situations of armed conflict remains at the heart of our mandate and our missions. For the ICRC, protection and assistance go hand in hand. Our presence on the ground ensures our proximity to the victims. We engage in confidential dialogue with State and non-State actors to uphold the rights of people affected, aiming as much as possible to prevent violations. We remind parties of their obligation to protect civilians, and we promote compliance with international humanitarian law. That includes supporting authorities' efforts to incorporate international humanitarian law into national legislation and into army training. It also includes working to clarify or develop international humanitarian law through extensive consultations with States and other stakeholders.

At the same time, the ICRC works to address victims' needs — food, water, shelter, other essential items or medical care — tracing missing family members and re-establishing links between them, and ensuring that people in detention are treated well. Protection can facilitate assistance, and vice-versa. The ICRC approach is only one of many among an increasing number of civilian and military actors, with different mandates, objectives and ways of working.

The United Nations has gone a long way in including protection activities in the mandates of its peacekeeping missions and in improving protection for specific groups such as women and children, refugees and internally displaced persons. The ICRC will continue to work for the protection of civilians within the limits of our

mandate and expertise, based explicitly on a neutral and independent approach. True consensus on the meaning of protection may be hard to achieve. It is essential to have clarity and transparency on the objectives of different actors, be they civilian or military, and to clearly distinguish between them. To avoid unrealistic expectations, it is important to distinguish between physical protection — which humanitarian actors cannot provide — and protection by promoting compliance with the law.

In any event, women, men and children in need of protection must truly be at the centre of any action that is undertaken. The challenge of turning words and intentions into concrete, meaningful action is one we all face. That challenge ultimately rests with States and non-State actors, both bound by international humanitarian law. I end by making a sincere plea to them and to the Council to show the necessary political will and good faith to turn legal provisions into reality — to take seriously the obligation to protect civilians. That would be the most meaningful progress of all.