# The ICRC's approach to contemporary security challenges: A future for independent and neutral humanitarian action

Pierre Krähenbühl*

The first years of the millennium have undoubtedly been difficult — and often dramatic — for the conduct of humanitarian operations. There were threats and attacks deliberately targeting aid organizations and their personnel, a fact that has raised questions about the ability of these organizations to fulfil their mandate and has generated a debate on the future of humanitarian action. There is much at stake in this debate for the ICRC.

In this article, I try to set out some thoughts and indications of 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, nature and characteristics. At a global level, a renewed polarization or radicalization is to be noted. This polarization makes itself felt in different ways, but the one that is affecting the conflict environments most perceptibly is the confrontation taking place between a number of States engaged in what is often now referred to as the "war against terrorism" and a series of radical non-State entities determined to oppose them and prepared to resort to the use of non-conventional methods of warfare. These include deliberate attacks against civilians and so-called soft targets, for example humanitarian organizations. Polarization is also apparent in the resurfacing of tensions between the so-called North and South in connection with such issues as poverty, terms of trade and access to and control of resources.

* The author is the Director of Operations of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). The article is an adapted and extended version of an address by the author at a humanitarian forum on "Challenges to Humanitarian Security", held at the Palais des Nations in Geneva on 31 March 2004.

The consequences of the attacks of 11 September 2001 thus continue to be felt around the world. The global struggle conducted in recent years by the United States of America and its allies has taken on various forms and includes operations both by police and by security forces. A number of States are using the pretext of the "fight against terrorism" to increase the pressure on internal opposition or resistance groups. In many cases the consequences for the civilian population are serious. This was the backdrop for the armed conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq and the deployment of foreign military forces in those countries.

While a number of individual contexts are affected by these global trends, an assessment of the reasons for conflicts breaking out or continuing in many other parts of the world shows that local causes remain predominant and, besides having political motivations, are usually linked with economic and social issues. In a number of countries, from Nepal to Burundi and from Liberia to Myanmar, conflict or violence stems from internal causes and results in extensive suffering. Identity-driven or so-called ethnic conflicts of the 1990s, with their massive casualties and large-scale population displacements, reappeared drastically this year in the Darfur region of Sudan, but no longer appear to be the commonest form of confrontation. Tactics connected with the "fight against terrorism", including acts of indiscriminate violence perpetrated by non-State entities and the spread of repressive policies in individual States, are at present much more in evidence.

### Implications for the security of humanitarian workers

Carrying out humanitarian activities in zones of armed conflict or internal violence has always been a dangerous undertaking. The ICRC currently has more than 11,000 staff members working in 79 contexts worldwide.[1] At every moment of the day they travel to areas that have seen fighting occur, or cross front lines between opposing parties in order to reach the persons they are mandated to protect and assist. They meet, negotiate or conclude agreements with the whole range of arms carriers present in these conflicts, from members of the military to the police, from paramilitary units to rebel movements, from child soldiers to mercenaries. For the ICRC, the security of its personnel is a crucial responsibility. While working in contexts of armed conflict or situations of violence evidently implies being confronted with

1 See the ICRC's Annual Report 2003, June 2003, published on the ICRC website at the following address: http://www.gva.icrc.org/Web/Eng/siteengo.nsf/htmlall/section_annual_report_2003 (visited on 7 July 2004).

significant levels of risk, it has always sought to develop approaches and instruments of security management that limit exposure to such risks to the greatest possible extent. The "classic" security environment is commonly described as one where the main risk is that of finding oneself "in the wrong place at the wrong time". It is worth noting — as we discuss some of the new features in terms of risks — that according to the ICRC's experience this type of security environment remains by far the most widespread in the world today.

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

Two of these three deliberate attacks, namely those north of Kandahar in March 2003 and south of Baghdad in July 2003, seem to have been the result of an apparent association of the ICRC's presence with the broader international political and military activities taking place in the countries concerned. The same could apply to the October 2003 car-bomb attack on the ICRC offices in Baghdad.

The question that inevitably arises is whether these attacks indicate a new trend. Yet ICRC delegates have been deliberately targeted in the past. The ICRC lost several staff members in deliberate attacks in Burundi and Chechnya in 1996 and in the east of the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2001. Also, other organizations have faced tragedies of their own.

It therefore seems legitimate to ask what is really 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 necessarily geographically circumscribed. The ICRC's security concept used to be based on an essentially context-based approach. A given delegation in the field would evaluate its security environment on the basis of a series of indicators, such as the acceptability of the ICRC and its activities, a factor that plays a prominent role.

Today, however, although such indicators may appear favourable in a given context, groups or individuals outside the local context or loosely connected with it might nevertheless target the ICRC's staff there.

A complicating factor is the fact that having access to the groups potentially willing to carry out such attacks is at present very difficult, when not downright impossible. Yet for the ICRC, dialogue with all parties involved in or affecting the outcome of a given conflict situation is a vitally important part of its operating procedures. Without such dialogue, it has proved impossible to achieve the required levels of acceptability, and thus

impossible to reach populations at risk so as to carry out the protection and assistance activities the ICRC is mandated to undertake.

### Between rejection and instrumentalization

Furthermore, in a polarized environment there are almost always expectations that any player present on the ground ought to take sides. One is friend or foe, ally or enemy and, whatever the choice, a choice has to be made. This makes it all the more complex for organizations such as the ICRC, working on the basis of the principles of independence and neutrality, to get their message across. This imposed polarization results in an increased importance of how the legitimacy of humanitarian action and in particular of the ICRC's neutral and independent way of operating is perceived.

This development entails two specific risks: that of being rejected and that of being instrumentalized. It appears at present that any player seen as influencing in one way or another the stabilization or transition efforts in Afghanistan or in Iraq is potentially at risk. Since in addition the ICRC's identity is perceived in some circles as mainly Western — because of issues related to funding, the emblem, the location of its headquarters — the risk of being mistaken for an integral part of the broader political and military presence in these countries is high. Such a perception might result in rejection of the ICRC as an independent and neutral player and a refusal to grant it access to the victims to whom it wishes to lend its assistance.

Regardless of what the motives behind such acts might have been, the ICRC has strongly condemned the attacks against its staff, which seriously impaired 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 instrumentalized, resulting from the tendency of some State authorities to integrate humanitarian action into the range of tools available to them in the conduct of their campaign against terrorist activities. This tendency has been manifested in various ways during recent months. They include statements by governments describing their military presence in Iraq and Afghanistan as "mainly humanitarian". The concept of the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) and their establishment by the Coalition forces in Afghanistan is another example. The ensuing blurring of lines between the role and objectives of political and military players on the one hand and humanitarian players on the other creates serious problems for an organization such as the ICRC, with regard to perception, acceptability and security at the operational level.

## The ICRC's response to security challenges

How does the ICRC intend to address some of the most pressing implications of the aforesaid developments? What must be borne in mind here is the ICRC's priority of ensuring, as much as possible, protection and assistance to the persons protected under the laws of armed conflict, in accordance with the mandate conferred upon it by the international community and its own commitment to do so. However, measures need to be taken in order to ensure the security of its staff, so that they can indeed reach those people and act on their behalf.

### Parameters of the ICRC's security management

The ICRC's concept of security management is based on the following main premises:

(i) The ICRC has a largely decentralized management culture, starting from the bottom up. This applies equally to security management. It strongly believes that the closer one is to populations at risk, the better-placed one is to analyse events and formulate strategies to address them. The ICRC has never viewed the security of its staff as distinct from that of the population living in the places where it works. The particular advantage sought in its operational approach is proximity to the people it is attempting to help.

(ii) To remain effective, this broad autonomy — also with regard to security issues — for ICRC delegations in the field has to be embedded in a clearly defined institutional framework: the organization's mandate, the principles of the Movement and the security concept under which the ICRC operates.

The cornerstone of the ICRC's approach to security management is that responsibility lies with the operational managers themselves. There is no separation between security management and operational management. Risk and threat assessment is an integral part of operational strategy definition and implementation.

When the Security Unit attached to the Department of Operations was established at ICRC headquarters ten years ago, an essential precondition set by operational field managers was that responsibility for security management would not be taken away from them. In that sense, the Security Unit functions more as a watchdog and focuses mainly on overall policy development, monitoring, support and training.

The ICRC is also convinced that security — long before it becomes an issue of technical or physical protection — is a matter of acceptance, perception of the organization, individual behaviour of delegates, the ability to listen and to communicate and project a consistent and coherent image of the organization to all parties involved in a conflict situation. In other words, one needs to be predictable, one needs to be seen to be doing what one says.

### Impact of the changing environment on the ICRC's general approach to security

The next question is then whether and how the said changes in the environment have had an impact on this overall ICRC approach? Four elements need to be mentioned:

(i) Tragedies such as those that occurred in 2003 could be an inducement to further centralize decision-making at headquarters. The ICRC, however, is convinced that it must maintain a decentralized approach.

(ii) In the light of the current security situation, the ICRC has realized that it needs to take account of the global nature of possible threats in its operations worldwide. It used to be enough to assess local risks and determine the organization's level of acceptance. Nowadays, the ICRC delegations around the globe are also required to assess the impact that global threats and misperceptions could have on their local environment. 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 indirectly.

(iii) This also requires new ways of communicating with players potentially able to act in or influence a given situation. Great attention needs to be given to establishing a fruitful dialogue with those who may misunderstand or reject the organization today.

(iv) Lastly, the ICRC is convinced that it remains important to make a strong stand for neutral and independent humanitarian action. Old recipes for a new world? The ICRC thinks differently; it maintains a principled position in the face of challenge.

Arguably, the ICRC could increase its effectiveness in facing these challenges in the following ways:

(i) It needs to improve the integration of national staff members in the security analysis and evaluation carried out in the respective contexts. Similarly, the dialogue on security with key national or local partners,

such as colleagues in National Red Cross or Red Crescent Societies, can and should be improved.

(ii) It needs to increase its knowledge of and develop broader relations with civil society and various existing or emerging non-State players, including traditional, economic, religious and social leaders. It needs to explain better why impartiality or independence matter, and why neutrality is relevant. The fundamental principles that inform its mode of operation and their relevance in the context of conflict environments need to be well understood.

### The continuing relevance of neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action

In the aftermath of 11 September 2001, the relevance of neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian action was questioned. Through its operations in the field, the ICRC seeks to demonstrate in concrete terms that its operational approach is not only credible but necessary in a polarized world.

It is not always easy to explain clearly what neutrality actually means. Taking a neutral position is often mistaken for indifference to the situation at hand. But not taking sides in a conflict does not mean being indifferent. The ICRC is not neutral in the face of violations of international humanitarian law. It takes a conflict as a given fact. It strives to ensure that all those taking part in the hostilities respect humanitarian law. Neutrality is therefore a means to an end, not an end in itself. It is a tool used to ensure access for concrete action in all situations. The ICRC seeks to establish and maintain a dialogue with all parties; no party wielding power over a civilian population would be excluded from such a dialogue. This does not constitute a pronouncement on their worthiness as interlocutors, nor does it grant them any particular status.

Impartiality means that humanitarian action should benefit people without discrimination, thus regardless of their origin, race, sex, religion, etc., and that the ICRC's operations are geared solely to the needs of the victims of armed conflicts. In other words, no one should be deprived of assistance or protection because of what he or she is or believes in. Assistance and protection must be provided according to needs.

Independence, as seen by the ICRC, implies that its humanitarian action needs to be distinct — and perceived as such — from any political or military interests. The reason for working independently is very

straightforward: in any conflict, parties will tend to reject humanitarian organizations they suspect of having ulterior political motives. This explains, unsurprisingly, why the ICRC is so adamant in insisting on respect for the individual identities, mandates and operational approaches of the various organizations working in the humanitarian field. Integrated approaches combining political, military, reconstruction and humanitarian elements, as advocated by the United Nations and a number of States, conflict with the principle of independence as understood by the ICRC and the entire International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Therefore, while these policies can be very effective for organizations with other mandates, the ICRC cannot and will not subscribe to them.

### Necessary distinction between humanitarian and military action

Advocacy for an independent and neutral approach to humanitarian action includes a claim for maintaining a clear distinction between humanitarian action on the one hand and political-military action on the other. This is not because the ICRC shies away from the military: on the contrary, the ICRC wants, needs and mostly has an active dialogue with the military and other forms of armed groups. Nor does it claim that there are no circumstances — when other players are incapable of fulfilling their mission — in which a military unit might not be a last resort. However, humanitarian activities should not be designed as part of "hearts and minds" military campaigns, nor should they be used as a tool to promote or accompany armed changes of regime. Such a blurring of lines between humanitarian and political or military activities may ultimately prevent humanitarian protection and assistance from being provided in a non-discriminatory manner for all victims of a conflict and must be avoided.

In that regard the ICRC does, for instance, have a problem with the Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan. The strictly military or security objectives they have set for themselves are not something the ICRC wishes to comment on. But there is cause for concern in the way they integrate humanitarian responses into an overall military and security concept, whereby responding to the needs of part of the population comes to be seen as a component of a broader strategy designed to defeat an opponent or enemy.

There may be political arguments for promoting or defending that approach. It is, however, important to stress that such a definition of humanitarian action is incompatible with the fundamental principles that govern

the ICRC operations. The ICRC therefore cannot and will not subscribe to or take part in it. It realizes that this might give the impression 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 principles and strategies. Serious account is taken of these criticisms and of other views on the matter, but the ICRC is convinced that the strategy it has adopted is the one that is most in accordance with its mandate and serves its humanitarian goals best.

### Clear identity and dialogue

However, the ICRC has nothing to be complacent about and is keen to learn from the experience of others. There is a genuine determination to engage in a transparent dialogue on these issues with all political, military and humanitarian players and other stakeholders, both in specific conflict situations where the sharing of analysis and threat assessment is often vital, and in more conceptual debates where progress can be achieved in understanding respective interpretations of humanitarian action. Fully recognizing that there are today many other definitions of humanitarian action than the one it has adopted, the ICRC does not claim that all other players should or can agree to its own definition and operational philosophy.

What is important for the ICRC, though, is to make its position well known and clearly understood: it must be able to convey what it will take part in, i.e. dialogue, consultation and, if appropriate, coordination with others, and what it will not accept, i.e. coordination or integration by others. The ICRC is strongly determined to maintain its principled operational approach in place, convinced that it remains as effective and as necessary as ever.

## Résumé


### *La stratégie du CICR face aux défis contemporains en matière de sécurité: un avenir pour l'action humanitaire neutre et indépendante*

*Pierre Krähenbühl*

*Les premières années du XXIe siècle ont indéniablement été difficiles – et souvent dramatiques – pour la conduite des opérations humanitaires. La polarisation du monde, de plus en plus marquée, la «guerre contre le terrorisme» et la diversification des acteurs impliqués dans les conflits qui agitent la planète ont transformé l'environnement dans lequel l'action humanitaire est menée. Conjuguée au concept de gestion intégrée des crises (combinant des outils politiques, militaires et humanitaires), cette réalité suscite le risque d'un rejet ou d'une instrumentalisation du personnel humanitaire par les parties aux conflits.*

*Les nouvelles formes de violence – en particulier la globalisation des risques et des menaces, la dynamique des conflits n'étant plus circonscrite à une seule zone géographique – interpellent aussi les organisations humanitaires. Le fait que les organisations d'aide et leur personnel soient délibérément pris pour cibles soulève des questions quant à la capacité de ces organisations de remplir leur mandat dans certaines situations et a engendré un large débat sur l'avenir de l'action humanitaire.*

*Il va sans dire que les enjeux de ce débat sont immenses pour le CICR. Dans cet article, le directeur des opérations du CICR émet quelques réflexions et indications sur la manière dont le CICR évalue les évolutions récentes dans l'espace humanitaire, tant en matière de sécurité que sur le plan opérationnel. Elles vont de la gestion de la sécurité, à l'identité et à l'image, à la pertinence constante des principes qui sous-tendent les modes d'action du CICR. L'auteur conclut en définissant les paramètres et les conditions de l'avenir d'une action humanitaire neutre, impartiale et indépendante.*