

Interview with Peter Maurer

President of the ICRC



Thierry Gassmann, ICRC.

Peter Maurer studied history and international law in Bern, where he obtained his PhD. In 1987 he entered the Swiss diplomatic service, and has since held various positions in Bern, Pretoria and New York. In 2000 he was appointed Ambassador and Head of the Human Security Division in the Political Directorate of the Swiss Department of Foreign Affairs in Bern and in 2004 became Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Switzerland to the United Nations in New York. In January 2010 Mr Maurer was appointed Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs in Bern. He succeeded Jakob Kellenberger as ICRC President on 1 July 2012.

In this interview, Mr Maurer reflects on the rich history of the ICRC, conveys his perception of the evolution of the organization, and presents his perspective on the challenges ahead for the humanitarian sector and the ICRC in particular.¹

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In your opinion, what is the significance of this 150th anniversary?

The 150th anniversary represents an important opportunity in the ICRC's history to reflect upon the future orientation of the organization. While the founders of the ICRC had envisioned the creation of an international charitable organization spanning several continents, they were certainly unaware at the time of the surge of solidarity that would emerge in the following decades for the wounded and sick in the battlefields, the prisoners of war detained far from their countries of origin, and the millions of civilians affected by armed conflicts. This is a humanitarian vision and a movement that has lasted 150 years, confronting numerous challenges and providing unique contributions to alleviate the impact of armed conflicts and other situations of violence on vulnerable populations.

As a historian by education, I am well aware that the 150th anniversary of our organization has no major objective meaning; important events in history normally do not happen because of birthdays. But there is the power of a symbolic number, which suggests generations of experience to be captured. History provides us with a critical lens through which we can look into the future. This anniversary gives us an opportunity to understand our identity and origins and thoroughly analyse what we have achieved in the past in order to chart our way into the future and be better prepared for the challenges ahead. We should try to determine the areas likely to be particularly relevant in the years ahead, so that the ICRC's response to humanitarian crises and its ability to reach people in need be even more accurate and effective. Rather than an occasion for self-congratulation, the 150th anniversary should be a time for future-oriented reflection and rededication. After all, the motivation behind our work has not changed since the final pages of Henry Dunant's ground-breaking book *A Memory of Solferino*. What changes, however, is how the organization adapts its response to different patterns of conflict and different contexts. Therefore, I think that '150' is a powerful symbol that should prompt us to reflect, to adapt, and, in so doing, to draw new perspectives and energies for the future.

1 This interview was conducted at the ICRC Headquarters in Geneva on 10 October 2012 by Vincent Bernard, Editor-in-Chief and Elvina Pothelet, Editorial Assistant.

How would you describe the evolution of the ICRC's identity?

What struck me during my first months in the organization is the strong identity around our *modus operandi*: the determination to be close to victims, to root action in response to needs and not to political agendas, to contextualize the humanitarian response, and to reunite assistance, protection, and prevention activities. In situations of armed conflict, populations are affected by armed violence and displacement as a direct result of decisions of the parties. In this context, assistance, protection, and prevention activities are unquestionably linked. One will not be able to provide either assistance or protection to vulnerable groups without addressing the role and policies of the belligerents with regard to these populations. Yet, as we have seen over recent years, parties to armed conflict are more amenable to the provision of relief assistance than the monitoring and scrutiny of their policies towards civilians. While assistance programmes require often-considerable logistics and operational capabilities, it is protection strategies that can ensure the timely and unhindered access to populations at risk. Linking the different concepts in an appropriate way will continue to be a great challenge, but also an opportunity for our organization.

Second, what we define as central to the ICRC's action also deserves careful consideration. In recent years, we have seen the ICRC strengthen its operations in situations of violence other than armed conflicts in the strict sense – in other words, those that fall below the threshold of application of international humanitarian law but are characterized by other forms of violence and regulated by domestic law and human rights law. We find ourselves increasingly working in fragile contexts outside armed conflicts, and I share the thinking that has led in this direction. At the same time, the impression that there are fewer armed conflicts seems to me misleading; the recent past has shown us quite the opposite. In fact, while there are surely fewer traditional inter-state armed conflicts, analysis of the situations in which we work today shows that we are moving towards a future in which there could be a persistence or even an increase in conventional conflicts between armed belligerents, i.e. state and non-state actors, including conflict patterns that we thought were outmoded several years ago.

So I think it is important to concentrate on the origin and core of the mandate, namely, armed conflicts and other situations of violence and the work of protecting civilian populations. Essential areas of activity include, quite logically, health, water, and sanitation, as well as food and nutrition in fragile societies. Beyond these core activities, we are all aware that the world is more complex, that problems are interrelated, that there are no strict boundaries between one thematic area and another, and that we have to be flexible, as in the past, so as to be able to direct our action towards the most pressing humanitarian needs. My first impression, after several months at the helm of the ICRC, is that we are very much on target and that our activities are addressing the core of our mandate.

How do you see the ICRC's relations with the rest of the humanitarian community?

The humanitarian community, its workers and organizations have changed substantially over recent decades. We see many more humanitarian organizations, or at least those that claim to have a humanitarian mandate or calling. I believe that we must try harder to define more clearly our relations with these organizations, either through closer cooperation, if possible, or clearer affirmation of our distinctiveness, depending on the respective contexts. In recent years, the ICRC itself has recognized – in its Strategy 2011–2014² – that our partnerships with the other actors in the humanitarian community must be defined. Personally, I believe that the ICRC increasingly needs to interact with other actors, both within and outside the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, so that it succeeds in fulfilling its own objectives and mandate. Identifying appropriate partners and working with them seems to me conducive to greater efficiency in reaching our goal of getting access to victims.



In terms of assistance and protection activities, I believe that, as a rule, we must certainly work more intensively in areas where the ICRC has a definite added value in assisting and protecting vulnerable populations, particularly to obtain immediate access to those most affected. In view of the growing number of organizations, it is essential to coordinate aid so that victims get help in time and in areas most needed. What is new is the need to discuss and communicate with these other agencies, to understand what they are doing, and to think about the areas in which cooperation is possible or necessary and the areas that are specific to each of us. It is also necessary to think about the best ways of jointly mobilizing the resources required, in the interests of the victims, and responding to concerns of donors that aid may be insufficiently coordinated.

2 Editor's note: See *ICRC Strategy 2011–2014: Achieving Significant Results for People in Need*, available at: <http://www.icrc.org/eng/assets/files/publications/icrc-002-4050.pdf> (last visited November 2012).

The extent of cooperation may vary according to each context or area of activity. I had a clear confirmation of this during my visit to Syria. Just to mention two examples: first, while visiting a food aid warehouse, I noticed that the stocks provided for distribution to the Syrian population were put together and organized differently depending on the organization involved (that is, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, World Food Program, the ICRC, and the Qatar Red Crescent Society). Would it not be useful to strengthen cooperation so that we could agree on the most accurate needs and the best way of distributing this aid? Second, that same day, I had discussions with the Syrian authorities on the issue of prison visits. One of the questions they were concerned about was to whom the ICRC's reports were addressed. Guaranteeing the confidentiality of the report and of the recommendations made to the authorities is crucial to obtaining – in return – the conditions that the ICRC needs, for example, individual interviews, comprehensive lists of prisoners, recurring visits to the same facilities, etc. In contrast to the food aid example, in this case it is essential to work on a bilateral basis with the authorities. For me, these are truly two examples of both the need for and the limits of cooperation between the ICRC and other organizations.

In my view, cooperation will not take place only at a practical field level. In order to work well together, you have to know what you are collaborating on and to what extent. In that regard, I have a role to play at the strategic level. It is a matter of having thorough discussions with our key partners, and of engaging regularly with the major non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), OXFAM, or Save the Children, and working with the key United Nations humanitarian agencies, such as the High Commissioner for Refugees, the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the Director-General of the World Health Organization, the Executive Director of the United Nations Children's Fund, and of course the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

What is unique about the ICRC today?

ICRC's specificity lies in its core mandate. One of the questions I was very concerned about during my first missions to the field was whether the ICRC's action on the ground could be clearly identified and linked to the organization's main tasks and identity. Is what we are doing reasonably consistent with our mandate? There are areas of activity that to me seem strategically important. For example, I cannot imagine a future ICRC that does not have a very clear vision and very advanced knowledge in the area of medical assistance and the provision of health services in times of crisis. Likewise, I cannot imagine an ICRC that is not very strong in all matters relating to the protection of detainees: hospitals and prisons are places where the ICRC must be present. Beyond this, we can discuss what constitutes our core business and what goes beyond it. The fact that we live in a world where the word 'humanitarian' is used in such an inflationary way impels me to be as precise

about the fact that what we are doing is connected to a clear mandate and identity for the organization.

We must be clear about the fact that everything we do must be linked to armed conflicts and other situations of violence, and that we will always care for the wounded and sick in the battlefield, attend and monitor the situation of detainees, and strive to support effective health-care systems and other basic humanitarian needs that can save lives in times of crisis. The core of our action will continue to be delivering essential emergency aid to populations in need. For me, this is what really constitutes our identity.

On my recent visit to the ICRC orthopaedic centre in Kabul, it seemed obvious to me that what we are doing is not only useful, but also fundamental to the ICRC's mission of providing assistance and protection to all those in need. War casualties are treated there, but they are not the only ones. And I think it is essential to have an orthopaedic centre that is not limited to treating war victims, but that also meets the wider orthopaedic needs of the community. Nevertheless, it is still important that ICRC activities emerge from its core mandate. I do not see any advantage in allowing ourselves to be drawn into an overly wide area of operations. That would turn us into a traditional development agency. We would be short-changing ourselves, and the humanitarian community as well, if we did not always concern ourselves first and foremost with fulfilling our mission. The point is not to get involved in activities that others may be able to do better.

What challenges does the ICRC face today?



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My first observation was that our major challenge is to affirm and define through our action and cooperation with others what neutral, independent, and

impartial humanitarian action is. Nowadays, unfortunately, many parties are instrumentalizing humanitarian crises to achieve political goals that have absolutely nothing to do with humanitarianism. This should mobilize us to explain clearly to our partners, to aid recipients, to the international community, and to donors what we mean by neutral, independent, and impartial humanitarian action. We have to be a bit sharper in explaining and raising awareness of the core principles. For example, I am very concerned about medical work. When we see how hospitals are misused and militarized during conflicts, and the ever-increasing threats against medical workers and doctors, I think there is a need to state and restate that ambulances, medical facilities, and medical workers are not to be harmed or interfered with. Recent conflicts reported by the media have shown that, even in Europe, where we might expect to find a consensus in favour of humanitarianism, some politicians think that there are 'good' and 'bad' victims – some who are to be treated, and others who are entitled to less attention. So I think the challenge is to explain the genuine meaning of independent, impartial, and neutral action and the importance of respecting a principled approach in reaching all those in need.

Another important challenge stems from states' sovereignty. I find it a very positive development that governments wish to assert their leadership in many countries: governance and state sovereignty should be strengthened so that states are able to manage their problems by themselves. Unfortunately, such a wish can also at times be transformed into a desire to exert more control over independent organizations for political reasons or to exclude independent assessment or aid. In this context as well, it is critical that state and non-state actors understand the importance of independent humanitarian action as a cornerstone of a neutral and impartial approach. While governments may well consider integrating targeted relief and development programmes to political and peace enforcement agendas, such as in the case of Somalia, it is vital that they also respect the integrity of independent humanitarian action providing life-saving assistance to all those in need regardless of their political affiliation. In situations where the government or international coalitions are unable to assert their control, the ICRC must be able to reach vulnerable groups in an effective manner.

There are many other subjects as well. I continue to think that the nexus between access and security continues to be a big challenge, although I recognize the difficulty to measure access objectively. Subjectively, we have to recognize that today more humanitarian organizations deploy activities and more aid is being provided; but there are strategic areas that are under stress. This is what concerns me the most. Blows are being struck at the heart of one of the ICRC's characteristics and strengths – its proximity to conflicts, to victims, and to weapon bearers. When this proximity is questioned or jeopardized, it affects us more than other organizations. There are agencies that do extraordinary work, but that do not aspire to be close to the ground, to victims, and to weapon bearers. They are not exposed to risk in inaccessible places and are less likely to be attacked. If an organization monitors activities from headquarters and delegates responsibility to local NGOs, it is less directly affected by attacks and by the contraction of opportunities for

humanitarian action. For us, it is very different. One of the ICRC's great strengths and traditions is its engagement with all parties to the conflict and its proximity to the people in need of protection. We must not let ourselves be drawn into the logic of fear, which would mean allowing the person who attacks us to dictate our actions. What I have always admired about the ICRC from the outside, and have continued to admire since I have been here, is the ability to negotiate and get parties involved in order to change their behaviour. I think that we must continue to push ourselves in this direction.

I must say that I am very pleased, for example, by what we have succeeded in doing in northern Mali. A few months ago, governments would have said, 'It's impossible to operate in such a situation, it's too dangerous, you can't be active in these areas considering the difficulties of engaging with all the belligerents', but we sought to establish contacts, we strove to negotiate security arrangements. In my view, this is a very good example of how to respond to the challenge of getting access.

We have talked about the external challenges. What are some of the internal challenges for the ICRC?

Over the last 150 years the ICRC has become a major international organization, today employing over 13,000 employees in over eighty countries. Compared to other international agencies, the ICRC's mandate covers a number of domains from health to nutrition, tracing missing persons to monitoring detention centres. Such size and scope of activities require a substantive and flexible management structure in order to be able to perform in some of the most demanding environments in the world. As compared to where the ICRC was only few years ago, the organization has become more astute and nimble in its management processes, particularly through the use of smart technologies, but it will certainly have to take further steps in this direction.

I am not someone who believes that major management solutions come from new technologies. But I think that new technologies can support good management solutions. I believe, for example, that an organization that spends over 170 million CHF³ a year on assistance goods across four continents has to professionalize itself still further in order to manage this flow of goods as effectively as possible. This requires a robust management of the supply chain and of channels that should, over time, enable us – if we make a qualitative leap into digitization – to reach people who need help more quickly and in a more targeted and appropriate way.

We also need to think thoroughly about how best to combine voluntary work, which is deeply rooted in the humanitarian community worldwide, with

3 Editor's note: See *ICRC Annual Report 2011*, Section 'Delivery of Assistance Items in 2011', pp. 482–483, available at: <http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/annual-report/icrc-annual-report-2011.htm> (last visited November 2012).

professionalizing humanitarian work in the future. One of the strengths of the humanitarian community is that it still relies on volunteers everywhere, especially in times of emergencies. On my travels, I am impressed to see the number of volunteers working to support humanitarian action. At the same time, conflicts are becoming more complex, the network of organizations is increasingly intricate, and expectations for the accountability of humanitarian workers grow continuously. We have difficult challenges and issues to manage and extremely complicated legal frameworks to deal with. We will not be in a position to cope without more specialized, focused, and effective training of humanitarian workers at all levels.

Finally, if we wish to improve humanitarian action further in the future – in five years, in ten years – in order to strengthen and professionalize the management and leadership of humanitarian action, we cannot avoid digitizing our work through electronic platforms, easier ways of exchanging information, and modern technology. Connecting an organization's staff members to a network will, over time, make it possible to link the organization's operational knowledge and legal capacity in the areas of assistance and protection. As long as we work in forms of hierarchical bunkers, we will have to subject ourselves to institutional limitations. But if we also use the next few years to communicate better and to forge links internally and with our key partners, I think that this will help strengthen the organization.

How do you see the ICRC's role in the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement?

When I started at the ICRC, and even before, when seeing it from the outside, I always thought that belonging to a movement was a great strength and a great privilege of the organization. It is something to which I give a lot of thought. I do not think that being unique in the world is a huge advantage in itself. We have a tremendous amount to gain by making good use of the fact that we are not alone, that we have a close-knit family and a supportive environment. And I believe that we must invest in relations within the Movement.

There are two things of which we are all aware. There are situations today in which National Societies are strongly placed to take leadership and where the ICRC is interested in strong partnerships. In most situations and large operations, we work with the local Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, and it is to our mutual advantage to strengthen these relationships. We are seeing more and more National Societies that have international dimensions to their activities, and we have every interest in striving for a more unified response on the part of all those who come together as part of the same family and who are working on the basis of the same principles. In doing so, it is not always necessary to have a complex machinery or complicated coordination mechanisms in order to make decisions – but we have to talk to each other, we have to see whether we are heading in the same direction, whether we have a common narrative, and we need arrangements that are adapted

for different contexts. We have to use the strength of this Movement according to the particular contexts.



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The proceedings of the most recent International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent show the key areas and the resolutions of the Movement in which the ICRC has a great interest. It is entirely to our benefit to use the existing structures to expand the base of those who support such key areas of interest. So there is a whole range of areas where I see a huge advantage in engaging in further strategic cooperation and cooperation on the ground, as well as in advocating for humanitarian values within the Movement. I view the Movement as an opportunity for local, regional, and international engagements. I will certainly commit myself to ensuring that the ICRC continues to convey and to strengthen this perspective in the future.

What is your vision of humanitarian diplomacy?

When I speak of operations, development of the law, and humanitarian policy, I do not view them as separate spheres. Humanitarian policy consists of diplomatic platforms to be used to promote our interests and actions. Thus, if I go to a country or an international conference, I go there to make a connection between the debates that take place at these conferences – at the UN, within the Non-Aligned Movement, at the Pan-African Conference of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies – but I also go there to promote the ICRC's operations, to find support for the development of the law, and to get backing for what we are doing. In my previous posts, it always bothered me that in the diplomacy of states there was friction and disconnect between the bilateral and multilateral spheres. We must avoid having this

disconnect where humanitarian diplomacy is concerned. There is no abstract humanitarian diplomacy that takes place in abstract diplomatic and political discussions and in virtual conference rooms.

The great challenge of humanitarian diplomacy is to strengthen operational humanitarian action by engaging in diplomatic fora where humanitarian contexts are on the agenda. The challenge is to use humanitarian diplomacy to seek the political support needed for operations on the ground. I think that this dynamic must be created, maintained, and developed. As the ICRC we are attentively listened to when we attend an international conference and talk about the reality on the ground. We can significantly strengthen action on the ground when we have political support for humanitarian action. Humanitarian diplomacy means being able to enter into this mutually reinforcing cycle between the operations, the development of the law, and the diplomatic and political discussions.

What about the dialogue with armed actors? How can we better induce them to respect international humanitarian law?

I believe that talking to all weapon bearers is a baseline for this organization. ‘Talking’ not only means negotiating operational access and security arrangements in order to provide assistance; it also means seeking to influence behaviour: refining arguments, spreading important values and standards. I think that in this preventive and educational context we must give some thought to the best way to act. I believe that we must avoid acting like schoolteachers and instead try to anticipate what the openings will be and what arguments we can use. For some time we may have thought that the best way to work with armed groups and to influence their behaviour was to use the same products and the same arguments, and that all we had to do was to repeat something several times for them to decide that we were right. I do not think that this kind of work can be done that way. On the contrary, we must recognize that we will succeed only if we understand armed groups and their thinking, what the problems are, and if we can adapt our arguments without adapting our values, standards, and interests. This is more of a discussion about methods and practice, and I have no immediate answers. But I am aware that this is a dimension in which further improvement is needed.

What are the key challenges today for international humanitarian law?

Besides the mandates that we received at the most recent International Conference, and on which we are already working, there are issues in terms of adjusting the standards to reality. The nature and types of conflicts are changing, the characteristics of the parties to these conflicts are evolving, and the battlespace where armed hostilities are actually taking place is in mutation under the common pressure of new technology and the transnational nature of today’s wars. This is similar to what I was just saying about the interaction between legal affairs,

operations, and humanitarian diplomacy. We must be attentive to new problems as they arise and respond through legal interpretations, commentaries, or law development if necessary. So there must be a continual effort in terms of clarification of the norms as applied to current conflicts.

If my initial assumption is correct – namely, that in the years ahead we will continue to be faced with a significant number of conventional conflicts between armed entities – state and non-state – then it will be necessary to clarify the existing rules that have been developed for mostly traditional state militaries engaged in a symmetrical conflict. One of the priorities is not to look at legal challenges as relatively abstract issues between academics, but to be attentive to needs of protection and engagement as they arise on the ground. The ICRC should be able to respond in a fairly precise way when an armed group or a military commander asks how to comply with the obligations on precautionary measures, proportionality, and targeting in the conduct of hostilities. A twenty-page legal opinion, while important in the development of the ICRC doctrine, is not going to be the most helpful in these circumstances. We need to be able to translate in lay terms why the compliance of the rules of international humanitarian law makes sense in legal, moral, and professional terms.

Is there a need to popularize international humanitarian law further?

Popularize, adjust, and interpret – these are indeed big challenges. I think it is really important to be able to explain the law in practical terms. We must be able to answer the legitimate questions that weapon bearers have and to explain to them how they must behave. It is also necessary to take stock of circumstances that might not have been foreseen when international humanitarian law was created. For example, the conduct of hostilities in urban areas has become a real problem. How should we respond to a military commander who is not necessarily ill-intentioned and who has legitimate operational questions?

Apart from the mandates involving development and exploration of the law, it is essential to ensure that our legal capacity is useful at the operational level. Then there are obvious challenges and thematic areas: everyone is talking about cyber warfare, the use of drones and robotics in hostilities, and the like, so we too must be able to keep our end up in a discussion on development of the law, and consider whether it is necessary – and if so, how – to align these new phenomena with the existing body of law. There is work to be done to identify the possibilities for action. One can identify the gaps, or decide that the law is sufficiently clear. But one can also decide that it is necessary to educate in order to show exactly how the law applies and which provisions of the existing law are relevant to the new phenomena as we see them. It is important for the ICRC to have a voice in these matters.

Lastly, it is necessary to reflect on how the ICRC wishes to interact with states in developing and interpreting the law. Ever since I arrived at the ICRC, representatives of states have been telling me that governments are increasingly

interested in participating in the development, clarification and interpretation of the law. This requires a more sustained and transparent engagement with the High Contracting Parties. We must devise good methods of interacting with states that take into account their way of seeing things. After all, they are the signatories of the Conventions. And I do not want this to be perceived as a defensive position. In my view, the ICRC has a responsibility to take the lead in these matters, to raise good questions in an independent and objective manner, to support formulations that we consider to be the most appropriate and effective. But we must not be afraid of the interest that states have in discussing legal issues and steering the development of the law proactively. Personally, I regard this as an entirely positive phenomenon. We must welcome the fact that this interest exists. Then we need to seek out discussions, to identify the areas of consensus and the possibilities for action, and perhaps also to be unafraid of controversy.