

PERSPECTIVES ON THE ICRC



Forced displacement and the role of the ICRC: perspectives for the twenty-first century

António Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees

António Guterres became the tenth UN High Commissioner for Refugees on 15 June 2005, and was re-elected by the UN General Assembly in April 2010. Before joining UNHCR, Mr Guterres spent more than twenty years in government and public life, serving as Prime Minister of Portugal from 1996 to 2002.

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The contemporary humanitarian landscape is evolving rapidly. Since the beginning of 2011, we have witnessed a proliferation of new crises and persistent conflicts have intensified and accelerated, all with tragic humanitarian consequences. In the last two years, conflicts in countries such as Côte d'Ivoire, Somalia, Libya, Mali, Syria, Sudan, and the Democratic Republic of Congo have led to widespread civilian casualties and the forced displacement of more than one and a half million people as refugees, with countless more displaced within their own countries or trapped in conflict zones.

Forced displacement is growing in complexity, affecting more people and for longer periods of time. The immediate drivers of conflict – competition for resources, social marginalization, and incomplete democratization processes – are compounded and accelerated by an intersection of global trends: population growth, urbanization, food and water scarcity, and climate change. At the same time, the capacity of the international community for the prevention and timely resolution of conflict is diminishing.

Humanitarian action is more necessary, and more challenging, than ever. Securing the space for neutral, independent, and impartial humanitarian action is an increasingly complex endeavour in highly politicized environments where humanitarian aid becomes a substitute for effective political engagement. Today's conflicts are fought by a multiplicity of actors, with unclear lines of command and control and a range of ideological, political, economic, and criminal motivations. The language of counterterrorism is used by certain states to restrict engagement of humanitarian actors with non-state armed actors and even to justify violations of international humanitarian law. Ensuring access to protection and humanitarian assistance for civilian populations displaced by fighting or trapped in conflict zones is an increasingly acute challenge.

In this rapidly evolving operating environment, the role of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is more critical than ever. From the perspective of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a number of key elements can be identified.

First, the ICRC's unique mandate, rooted in international humanitarian law, its commitment to operating in line with humanitarian principles, and its focus on proximity to populations in need enable it to continue to work even in acute conflict zones that have become largely inaccessible to the majority of other humanitarian actors, such as in Northern Mali, Yemen, and southern Afghanistan. The ICRC's consistent reassertion of neutrality, its commitment to realizing this through practical action, and its determination to engage in dialogue with all actors have very tangible consequences for the lives of conflict-affected populations.

Second, the ICRC's strong protection mandate provides the basis for a critical contribution to preventing and addressing the consequences of forced displacement (both within and across borders), operating in a complementary manner to that of UNHCR and other protection actors, including states. This translates into very practical cooperation at field level, which draws upon the distinct roles and mandates of the ICRC and UNHCR, on issues such as tracing and the re-establishment of family links, providing medical care for injured refugees, issuing emergency travel documents, maintaining the civilian and humanitarian character of asylum, contributing to durable solutions through clearance of landmines, and dissemination of and training on international humanitarian law.

The ICRC plays a particularly critical role in tracing the family members of unaccompanied and separated children and carrying out family reunification, including through the establishment of dedicated services such as that recently set up for Syrian refugees in Za'atri camp in Jordan. The organization frequently also provides life-saving assistance in new refugee emergencies, such as in Maban County in South Sudan where its contribution to improving access to clean water has been considerable. The ICRC's work with vulnerable migrants in situations of conflict and violence (as for example, in the Libya crisis) has also been extremely important.

Third, the ICRC fulfils an important guidance and standard-setting function. Its leadership in forging common approaches to protection is crucial, including through the recent revision of the *Professional standards for protection*

work carried out by humanitarian and human rights actors in armed conflict and other situations of violence, in which UNHCR was an active participant. Its analysis and guidance on the interface between protection actors working in the humanitarian sphere and international military and peacekeeping forces engaged in protection remains extremely valuable. UNHCR also benefits considerably from dialogue and shared analysis of the changing nature of conflict and emerging protection gaps.

Looking forward, a number of key issues would benefit from renewed or deeper attention from the ICRC.

The first relates to protection gaps arising from cross-border displacement linked to sudden-onset disasters, including those related to climate change. A group of states, led by Norway and Switzerland, has now launched the Nansen Initiative as a means of generating a debate on how these gaps might be addressed. The ICRC's engagement with this process would be extremely valuable in light of its protection expertise and its close relationship with national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies.

Second, a continued focus on 'other situations of violence' outside classic situations of armed conflict remains important. Such forms of violence, including those linked to organized crime in urban areas, are increasingly emerging as a cause of displacement, but lawyers and decision-makers do not always view this through a refugee protection lens. The ICRC's expertise in addressing other situations of violence through a protection framework is of considerable value.

Third, the ICRC's renewed attention to early recovery has the potential to make a real contribution to durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons, and we would urge that this commitment be strengthened. At the most recent session of the United Nations General Assembly, the ICRC rightly drew the attention of member states to the plight of individuals and communities living for decades on end in protracted displacement. It is critical that ways be found to enhance human dignity and self-reliance from the outset of new emergencies, and that we collectively find ways of facilitating access to existing services and supporting alternative settlement options rather than defaulting to the traditional camp-based models. In this regard, the ICRC has an important contribution to make in helping to reshape approaches to the provision of protection and assistance to refugees and displaced persons outside camps, and to the communities who host them.

The ICRC plays a unique role today, as in the past. In a context in which humanitarian actors within (and indeed, beyond) the UN system are under increasing pressure to operate as part of an integrated approach, which risks harnessing humanitarian action to broader political and security agendas, the ability of the ICRC to reach conflict-affected populations in the most acute situations of violence is a very tangible and practical demonstration of why humanitarian principles matter, and why the ICRC remains as relevant today as at its founding 150 years ago.