

WAR IN CITIES

VILLES EN GUERRE

An ICRC exhibition on urban warfare and
its catastrophic impact on the civilian population



ICRC





Aleppo, Syria. 2013.
H. Vanesian / ICRC





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WAR IN CITIES

VILLES EN GUERRE

War in cities is not a new phenomenon. In the past, we can find in what has been called the history of the city. At the same time, modern warfare is increasingly being fought in urban areas, and more and more people are bearing the brunt of the consequences.

Yet urban warfare is by no means new. The tactics of past urban wars are still seen today: sieges intended to starve out or demoralize the opponent, aerial bombardments designed to terrorize the civilian population, and intense, artillery-backed street-to-street fighting.

When wars are fought in cities, it damages or destroys the infrastructure that communities rely on to function. Warring parties too often fail to distinguish between military objectives and civilian infrastructure. Or worse, they seize it for themselves as target in itself.

Prolonged urban conflicts are devastating parts of the Middle East. Highly destructive wars in ancient cities of Iraq, Yemen and Syria have driven 17.5 million people from their homes and exacerbated the greatest global refugee and migration crisis since the Second World War.

The historical and contemporary national materials in this exhibition highlight the staggering toll on people, the humanitarian needs arising from wars in urban landscapes, but also people's resilience. The objects illustrate the devastating impact on the lives of the people in two particularly hard-hit cities of Iraq: Baghdad, in Anwar Prisoner, and Baal, in Salah al-Sayid Prisoner.

Les guerres urbaines ne sont pas un phénomène nouveau. Dans le passé, nous pouvons trouver dans l'histoire de la ville. À la même époque, la guerre moderne est de plus en plus souvent menée en zones urbaines, et de plus en plus de personnes en subissent les conséquences.

La guerre urbaine n'est cependant pas une nouveauté. Les tactiques employées par le passé sont toujours d'actualité : sièges visant à affamer ou à démoraliser l'adversaire, bombardements aéroportés destinés à terroriser la population civile, et combats de rue soutenus par l'artillerie.

Quand les guerres se déroulent dans les villes, les infrastructures vitales qui permettent au fonctionnement de fonctionner sont endommagées ou détruites. Les belligérères tentent souvent de distinguer entre objectifs militaires et infrastructures civiles. Or, plus souvent, ils s'en prennent à ces dernières en tant que telles.

Des conflits urbains prolongés déchirent les régions urbaines du Moyen-Orient. Des guerres extrêmement destructrices dans l'Irak, le Yémen et la Syrie ont entraîné 17,5 millions de personnes à quitter leur foyer, contribuant à la plus grande crise de réfugiés et de migrants que le monde ait connue depuis la Seconde Guerre mondiale.

Les traces d'exemples historiques de résilience humaine et de besoins humanitaires dans les zones urbaines en conflit sont présentées à travers des objets qui illustrent l'impact dévastateur de la guerre sur la vie des habitants de deux villes irakiennes particulièrement touchées : Bagdad, avec le prisonnier d'Anwar, et Baal, avec le prisonnier de Salah al-Sayid.





PREFACE: WAR ON YOUR DOORSTEP


In recent years we have seen a resurgence in urban warfare and siege operations in conflicts like those taking place in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. As people increasingly move to cities, so does armed conflict. Tomorrow's wars will inevitably be fought in urban areas, where half of the world's population now lives.

This type of warfare occurs in civilian spaces, amongst the people. So what happens when war quite literally knocks at the door of your apartment? The horrors of being trapped in a city at war are manifold: the water stops flowing, the light and heating go off, the windows are shattered by the shock waves from nearby explosions, the road to school becomes a deadly path, the banks shut down, doctors empty out of nearby hospitals, food becomes scarce, and life turns into a constant struggle to survive.

For people trapped in cities at war, fleeing is often the only option. They leave behind their jobs and studies, belongings, security, hopes and loved ones; they also leave behind the place they quite simply call home and a familiar way of life that in many cases they will never be able to return to. Cities empty themselves into other cities or camps, and displacement causes a cascade of other humanitarian and social challenges that are felt along their journey and all over the world, wherever these people seek refuge.

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is present on this modern-day battlefield, ready to fulfill its humanitarian mission. Through our work, we witness the dramatic consequences that war in cities has on people. To share our experience and promote current and future compliance with international humanitarian law (IHL) in urban settings, we launched a series of initiatives to coincide with the issue of the International Review of the Red Cross on war in cities. We organized special publications, conferences and expert meetings at the Humanitarium, the ICRC's conference center in Geneva, as well as in several other countries around the globe. We wanted to share the experiences of the people caught on the frontline, through testimonies, interviews, photos and films. We also brought real objects from war zones.

Wars are generally represented in museums long after the facts have been documented and the dead buried. Such exhibits tell the story of the military operations, great offensives, defeats and victories through maps, uniforms and weapons, and heroic paintings or sculptures of the fighters. But wars can be told in a different way: a teddy bear covered with grey concrete dust or a surgical kit brought back from a modern battlefield recount another, yet no less important, story.



We asked our ICRC colleagues in Iraq to collect objects from areas they visited just after the fighting had stopped as they brought relief or family news to survivors. The request was unusual and it took a few trips to identify, photograph and collect these items from the destroyed cities of Baiji and Ramadi. With the authorization of their owners or the local community, these objects were collected from destroyed buildings that had just been cleared of explosives, from the streets and from a school left in ruins that the ICRC was helping to rebuild. We brought them to Geneva and selected some of them to go on display as part of a multimedia exhibition on war in cities based on the ICRC's extensive film, photo and audio archives.

The objects gathered for this exhibition are not archaeological artefacts, unique works of art or even beautifully crafted. They did

not belong to famous people or cost lots of money. Most of them are the products of our globalized, industrialized world, produced by the million and sold the world over. Some are typical of the Middle East, but many could be found anywhere: a handbag, a metal gate, a toy made in China. Yet we displayed them with respect, as they bear witness to the suffering of civilians in today's urban wars and demonstrate why the law of war matters.

These objects are real – they once served a simple purpose in a community or a school, brought joy to a child or pride to a household. That is, until a bomb exploded and their owners had to flee. Strangely, it is their banality and the violent intrusion of war that make these objects so poignant. They may just be humble relics of an ongoing, distant war, but they speak volumes if you take the time to listen.

Vincent Bernard

ICRC Law and Policy Forum
Editor-in-Chief of the International Review of the Red Cross

THE CONCEPT

In 2017, the “War in Cities / Villes en Guerre” exhibition on urban warfare and its catastrophic impact on the civilian population opened at the Humanitarium in Geneva, Switzerland.

The aim of the exhibition was to raise awareness among the humanitarian and diplomatic communities of the pervasive effect warfare has on urban populations and to contribute to strengthening compliance with international humanitarian law and respect for humanitarian operations during conflicts in urban settings.

The exhibition was held in conjunction with the ICRC’s 2017 Conference Cycle on War in Cities, which aimed to foster academic debate and research on the humanitarian challenges and human costs of urban armed conflicts.

Juxtaposing historical and contemporary perspectives, the exhibition tapped into visitors’ senses in an effort to bring the realities of war in cities closer to home.

Using video footage and photos from several urban conflicts throughout history, the exhibition served as a reminder that war in cities is not a new phenomenon. In addition, the audio excerpts of testimonies by former ICRC delegates and from other people affected by urban conflict gave a human voice to the cities destroyed. More recent objects collected on battlefields in Iraq in 2017 were also on display. These war-stained items contrasted starkly with the clean, sterile walls of the exhibition space.







WAR IN CITIES THROUGHOUT HISTORY

War and cities have been intimately linked since the dawn of history. In ancient times, battles were fought between cities. And although cities were sometimes destroyed, the objective was usually to bring them under the aggressor's control. Their concentration of wealth and power made them coveted prizes for adversaries. Cities thus fortified themselves militarily, prepared for sieges and became military strong points in which rural populations sought refuge in times of peril.

By the 19th century, the trend had reversed. Cities removed their defences and became purely civilian places. Rural populations and immigrants seeking personal advancement moved into these urban centres. As industry and craftsmanship grew in the 20th century, so too did urbanization. Today, more people across the world live in cities than in rural areas.

Now cities have become heavily populated centres of political and economic power and are therefore once again wartime targets. New means of warfare have been used with growing ferocity. While the threat sometimes comes from the air, the Second World War showed us that great battles can be fought on the ground within cities as well.

We have seen this again in the former Yugoslavia, the Caucasus and the Middle East. Indeed, urban warfare now constitutes one of the greatest challenges to humanitarian action.

Their concentrated population, their status as transport and communication nexuses, their medical and sanitary infrastructure, their cultural treasures – all these things and others make them the object of concern regarding compliance with international humanitarian law.

Those carrying out humanitarian work must think in terms of the individual. Yet they must also take into account entire communities, supply and sanitation systems, and medical care. And humanitarian organizations cannot focus entirely on emergency aid but must also consider long-term recovery and reconstruction as acute concerns.

By using historical and contemporary examples, the exhibition highlighted the specific nature of urban warfare and the humanitarian needs arising from this type of conflict.







Das Rad der Kutsche
ca. 1800

Das Rad der Kutsche ist ein historisches Objekt, das in der Sammlung der Kutschenmuseen zu sehen ist. Es ist ein Rad aus Eisen mit einem Holzspeichenrad und einem Metallspeichenrad. Das Rad ist in der Mitte mit einem Metallbolzen befestigt, der in der Mitte des Rades ist. Das Rad ist in der Mitte mit einem Metallbolzen befestigt, der in der Mitte des Rades ist.

ca. 1800



OBJECTS FROM THE BATTLEFIELD

Tragically, war in cities is not limited to the distant past. In 2017, ICRC field staff in Iraq collected objects in Baiji and Ramadi, with help from Anmar Quasi, a cameraman working for the ICRC. Both cities had been largely destroyed by heavy fighting. Their residents had to flee to safer places, leaving their belongings behind. Over the past two years, Ramadi has made progress on the path to recovery and reconstruction, while Baiji is still off limits to its inhabitants due to the large-scale destruction and prevalence of unexploded remnants of war.

This section delves into the first part of the exhibition, which tells a story of war in cities through the objects collected in Baiji and Ramadi.



Baiji, a city of about 200,000 inhabitants, is located to the north of Baghdad, on the main road to Mosul. It is a major industrial centre and a key rail hub.

Ramadi is a city in central Iraq, to the west of Baghdad. In 2011, Ramadi's population was estimated at about 375,000 people. The city is strategically located on the Euphrates River and the road leading to Syria and Jordan, making it a hub for trade and transportation.

These two cities have been left devastated as a result of the invasion by the US-led coalition in 2003 and the subsequent Iraqi insurgency, which continues today.



These are stills from a video documenting the dismantling and removal – with the community’s consent – of a bullet-ridden gate from a destroyed house in Ramadi. The house itself was still wired with explosives. The gate was dismantled by Abbas, an Iraqi Army demining expert.



House gate

Ramadi, June 2017

Ramadi's houses have been heavily damaged by shelling, car bombs, other explosions and the fierce fighting that has taken place there.



Pillow

Baiji, June 2017

Many Iraqi homes have a traditional Arab living room, where families and guests sit on mattresses on the floor and lean on pillows for comfort.





Teddy bear

Baiji, June 2017

Everything was out of place in this living room, including this teddy bear abandoned by its child-owner. It lay amid debris, covered with mud and dust. The teddy is holding a red heart with the word "Love" written across it.



A woman's handbag

Baiji, June 2017

This handbag was among many items (clothes, shoes, bed sheets) strewn on the floor. Someone must have ransacked this room – another manifestation of the cruelty of war.





Tea saucers

Baiji, June 2017

Traditional tea stalls are a common sight in all Iraqi towns. They usually sell strong tea and hot smoked-dried lime drinks.

All that remains of this stall is a few burnt cups and saucers scattered on what is left of the table where the tea-making equipment stood.



Ceiling fan

Ramadi, June 2017

It is hot most of the year in Iraq and fans are a priceless item, particularly during the summer months. Apart from the fan shaft, there is little left of this classroom at the Al-Raja'a High School for Girls. These mangled remains of the fan were collected from one of the classrooms. The school was rebuilt by the ICRC as part of a wider education-related initiative in 2017.





Bike wheel

Baiji, June 2017

A bike and a burnt-out car lie in the street in front of a scorched building in a severely damaged Baiji neighbourhood. The bike's front wheel and bell were collected and shown at the exhibition.



Door sign from a school

Ramadi, June 2017

Hallway of the Al-Raja'a High School for Girls in the city of Ramadi, Anbar, with classrooms on the right and a teachers' room on the left.

A door sign was collected from this abandoned and largely wrecked building.

Urban warfare does not spare schools or other public buildings. In many cases, they are used as shelters for the homeless, to store ammunition or as sleeping quarters for fighters.





Loudspeaker

Baiji, June 2017

One muezzin's loudspeaker from al-Hamid Mosque. It remained on the top of the minaret after it fell to the ground, along with the rest of the mosque, during the fighting in 2016. It was one of four loudspeakers on the minaret used to call people to prayer five times a day.



Plates

Baiji, June 2017

Though nearby detonations caused many objects to fall into this kitchen sink, the plates remained lined neatly on the wall rack. Their presence suggests that the residents had no time to gather their belongings before fleeing the city.

The debris on the floor hints at the extensive destruction to the rest of the house.





Doll

Baiji, June 2017

This doll, its head and face partly burned, was found caught in barbed wire near an industrial facility. It may have been left behind by a fleeing child. Its position says much about the effects of war on children.



Erbil, 2017.
An ICRC emergency
room specialist
and a surgical ward
nurse are changing
the bandages of an
11-year-old boy who
was injured in an
attack in East Mosul.

S. Mansikkamäki/
Finnish Red Cross





Fallujah, 2016.
The ICRC distributes
food and relief
items to over 7,000
displaced people.

I. Sherkhan/ICRC

Response in Iraq

Iraq, 2016–2017

Glimpses of the ICRC's relief work and health-care operations in and around Ramadi and Baiji.

At the exhibition, a box of cooking equipment and some medical supplies were displayed as examples of objects typically delivered in Iraq as part of the ICRC's humanitarian operations in the field.

OTHER OBJECTS

The following images show other objects from the collection that were not displayed at the Humanitarium.



School visual

Ramadi, June 2017

In many public schools in the Middle East, handmade tools are commonly used to reinforce the teaching process. The visuals covered in debris and dust hang feebly on the broken metal stands amidst the rubble left inside the ravaged classroom.



Melted baby-walker

Ramadi, June 2017

According to the headmistress of the Al-Raja'a High School for Girls, the room in this picture was turned into a bedroom for displaced families. What remained in the burnt and destroyed room was a baby walker melted by fire, with the plastic parts stuck to a shoe.



Photos

Baiji, June 2017

It is said that a photo speaks a thousand words. These two pictures found among the remains of this house in Baiji speak many more.

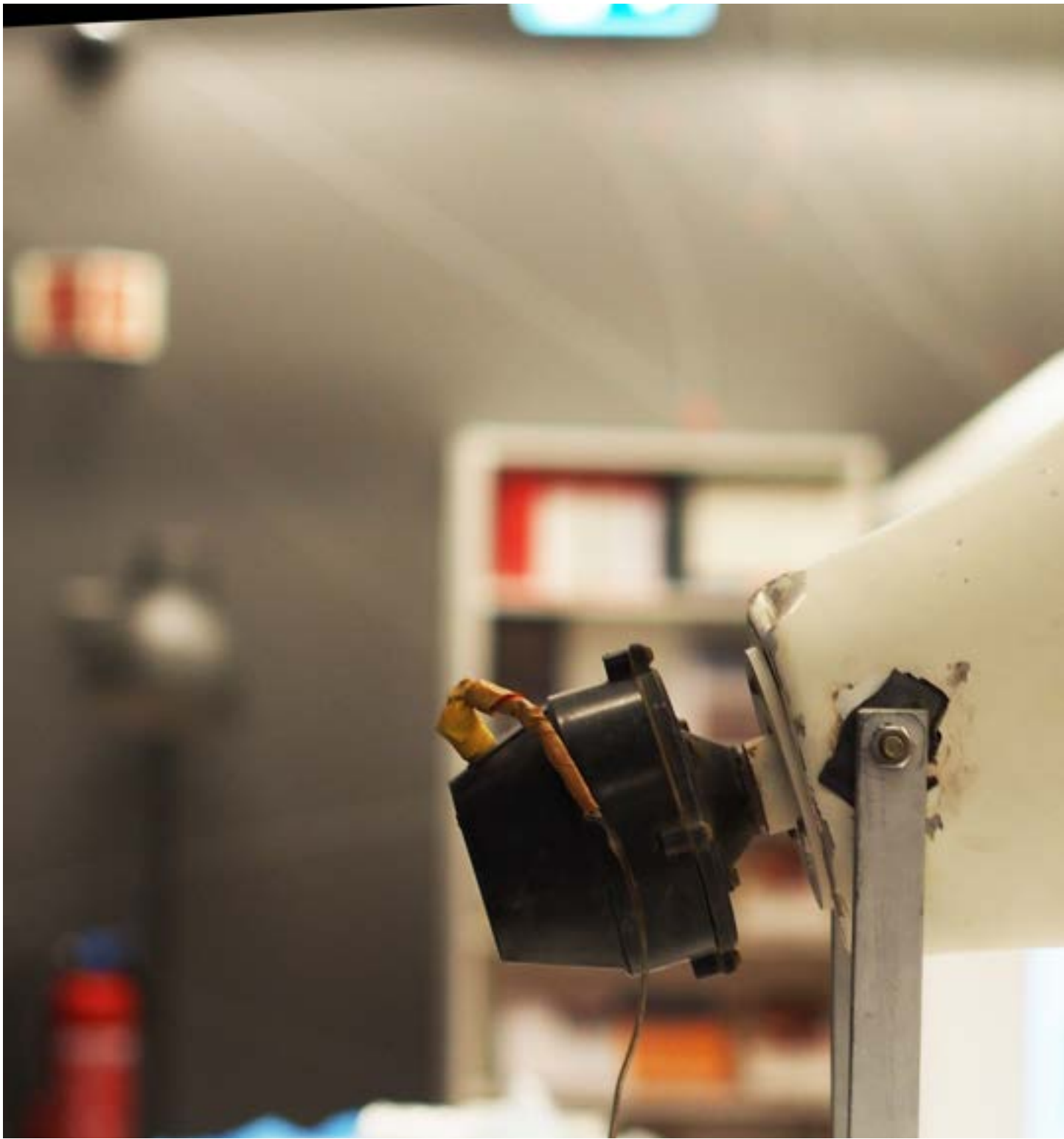


Qura'an

Baiji, June 2017

For a Muslim, the Qur'an has to be protected and preserved at all times. You mustn't touch it unless you are totally clean both physically and spiritually.

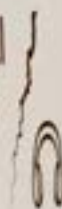
The small private library in this house is still standing amidst the rubble. Many religious books can be seen on the shelves. The large copy of the Qur'an can be seen on the bottom shelf in its green protective casing.





KOLWEZI

24 juin 1978



Un silence pesant sur un air si blanc
Il faut une ville toute grise et nue
de son silence, comme l'on voit que les
dépenses se font toutes par la
des dépenses, toutes les dépenses, par des
toutes les dépenses.

INTERVIEW: FREDERIC LEROUX
2005

INTERVIEW: FREDERIC LEROUX
2005



FROM THE ARCHIVES: THE RISE OF WAR IN CITIES

It is said that the first “true” city arose in the Middle East several thousand years ago, and the earliest written accounts of wars waged against cities come from the same region.

Centuries later, the Middle East is still the place where urban warfare takes its greatest toll. Homs, Ramadi, Palmyra, Fallujah: these names are just a few in the long list of cities ravaged by war.

It is also in cities that humanitarian action is at its most wide-ranging and diverse.

This section showcases photos, video stills and audio excerpts from the ICRC’s audio-visual archives, remembering past and present urban armed conflicts. The images, films and sound bites have been divided into three themes: destruction, resilience and response.



*... There is a lack
of water, a lack
of food... [People]
have to flee
the town if they
want to avoid
being killed...*



Quote from an audio excerpt of Béatrice Mégevand's experience in Mogadishu, 1991. (Reference: V-S-12304-A-01)

DESTRUCTION



*The first impression
at Kolwezi was rather
difficult... the city was,
say, nearly plastered
with dead bodies...*

*... All those dead bodies were
lying there since days... The smell
of the city was really terrible.*



Quotes from an audio excerpt of Frédéric Steinemann's experience as
a delegate in Kolwezi, 1978. (Reference: V-S-10304-B-03)

“And Abimelech fought against the city all that day; and he took the city, and slew the people that was therein, and beat down the city, and sowed it with salt.” (Book of Judges 9:45)

The history of war is rife with the destruction of cities throughout the world, from antiquity to the modern day. We find examples not only in the Bible, but also in legends – such as Homer’s depiction of the sack of Troy in the Iliad – and in real-life events, including the siege of Jerusalem in 70 CE. It is the methods and means that have changed over the millennia. Rather than being burned like Carthage, cities like Coventry or Homs are now bombed.

Urban centres are both threatening and desirable to belligerents. As places where otherness is most strongly and freely expressed, they represent both strategic and ideological obstacles. That is why attackers do not content themselves with capturing cities, but also pillage and destroy them. They sometimes raze them to the ground so that no physical or cultural trace of that otherness – the enemy – remains. If the inhabitants are not killed or taken captive, they are driven out or forced to flee. Their absence contributes to the attacker’s final aim of totally annihilating a city, sometimes even erasing it from memory.



Even though, by law, civilians must be protected, they continue to be driven from their homes, injured and killed. Their communities are torn apart, and the basic services that are essential for their survival are disrupted.



Children are especially vulnerable in armed conflicts. Despite the protection provided by law, it is not uncommon for them to be driven from their homes, separated from their families, maimed, sexually abused or otherwise exploited, or even killed.

A family's decision to leave is always tragic. The law says that only military objects can be attacked. But when people's homes are destroyed anyway, they become desperate. They no longer see any future in the place that has been their family's home for generations.



Women are entitled to special protection, but fighting can still have a devastating impact on them, especially if they are pregnant or caring for young children. And if their husbands go missing or are imprisoned or killed, it only adds to the hardship they face.



Azerbaijan, 1991.
Geranboy district, Shafak. What is left of the school.

Credit: O. Litvin / ICRC



Poland, 1939-1945.
Affected children.

Credit: ICRC Archives



Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, 2009.
Gaza. Children play amid the ruins of their home in the Asbet Abu Rabu neighbourhood of Jabalia area.

Credit: T. Domaniczky / ICRC



China, 1937.
Sino-Japanese war, 1937-1938. Bomb damage at Shanghai's southern train station.

Credit: ICRC Archives



South Korea; Korea, 1950.
Korean War, 1950–1953. Refugees leave Seoul by crossing the Han River.

Credit: C. T. Jackson / US army photo



Biafra, 1968.
Biafra conflict. The impact of bombing in Aba.

Credit: ICRC



Germany, 1945.
Dresden. The Old Market after the bombing of the city.

Credit: ICRC Archives



Lebanon, 2006.
Al Rweiss neighbourhood, Beirut. Destroyed buildings.

Credit: B. Schaeffer / ICRC



Syria, 2013.
Old city of Aleppo. Destroyed houses on the frontline stand alongside still-occupied, intact houses just a few meters away.

Credit: H. Vanesian / ICRC



Ukraine, 2014.
Sloviansk, Nikolaevka, Donetsk region. Damaged buildings after the shelling in July.

Credit: M. Dondyuk / ICRC



Spain, 1936-1939.
Madrid during the Spanish Civil War. The impact of bombing near Plaza España.

Credit: ICRC archives



Kyrgyzstan, 2010.
Osh, Tashashlak district. The Tolstoy High school was destroyed by the fighting. English teacher Tanzila surveys what is left of her workplace.

Credit: M. Kokic / ICRC



Lebanon, 1982.
Beirut. Damaged cemetery.

Credit: L. Chessex / ICRC



*... I beg you not to worry, not to cry
because dear God will help us to come
as soon as possible...*



Quote from an audio excerpt of a reading of a Red Cross message written by a Sarajevo child to his/her mother. Sarajevo, 1995. (Reference: V-S-14553-A-01)

RESILIENCE



... They had to organise themselves. Somali doctors and the population, they created some hospitals in private houses...



Quote from an audio excerpt of Béatrice Mégevand's experience in Mogadishu, 1991. (Reference: V-S-12304-A-01)

“I got home and drank two cups of hot water with bread and butter... Thanks to all this good news, my mood lifted immediately.” (The Diary of Lena Mukhina: A Girl’s Life in the Siege of Leningrad)

But cities resist too. Cities do not give in. Even under siege, life goes on (almost) as usual. This spirit is documented in the well-known photograph of readers browsing among the stacks of books at Holland House Library in London, even though the roof had collapsed after the building was bombed by the Germans during the Blitz of 1940. The election of Miss Besieged Sarajevo during that city’s darkest hour in 1993 also comes to mind.

And yet, in such extraordinary times, life and death are always closely linked. Images of bodies littering the streets of starving Leningrad or of civilian casualties during the siege of Nuremberg in 1632 – where half the city’s population perished – remind us that any sense of “normality” in cities during wartime is only surface-deep and depends on the resilience of those who live there. On rare occasions, a city destroyed by war can be reborn once stability returns. Such was the case for Phnom Penh, which was completely emptied of its millions of inhabitants in April 1975 but came back to life after the fall of the Khmer Rouge.



"Until now my daughters wake up at night, afraid. They want their mother. They miss her. We all do. However I am so happy to see my daughters growing up, going to school, their lives are being restored."

— Abu Hani, who lost his wife and son when two rockets hit his home in the Old City of Homs. January 2017. Yemen*



"I can finally run around. Before, we were living underground, we could rarely go outside because of the shelling. Our only toys were pieces of stone."

— a child from Syria playing at a camp for displaced people*



“People are eating from the garbage because they can't get food. We've seen women boiling tree leaves just to give children some hot soup.”

— Nancy Hamad, head of the ICRC's sub-delegation in Taiz, Yemen*



“People often want to go home as soon as they can. Returning home is a way of restoring their identity. But it depends on how much of their home is left.”

— Avril Patterson, the ICRC's health coordinator in Syria*

*From the ICRC report, “I saw my city die”, May 2017.



Colombia, 2007.
Ciudad Bolivar. A displaced family living in precarious conditions.

Credit: W. Krassowski / ICRC



Germany, 1947.
Post-war Berlin. Distressed, cold and hungry, elderly people warm themselves in this hall.

Credit: ICRC



Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, 2011.
Rafah City, Southern Gaza. Young men smuggle goods through a tunnel along the border with Egypt.

Credit: I. El Baba / ICRC



Kosovo; Yugoslavia, 1999.
Lozica. Preparing a meal amongst remains of what was once the family home.

Credit: B. Heger / ICRC



China, 1943.
Shanghai during the Second World War. A school in the Civil Assembly Center.

Credit: ICRC archives



Lebanon, 1996.
Nabatiyeh, Southern Lebanon. A village left in ruins by the fighting.

Credit: M. Naamani / ICRC



Yemen, 2015.
Taiz. This boy visits a library in his school, which was totally destroyed.

Credit: W. Al Absi / ICRC



Afghanistan, 1994.
Kabul. Civilians fleeing the fighting through the city's ruins.
Credit: E. Bouvet / GLMR ET SAGA



Chechnya, Russia, 1995.
Grozny. Sweeping up the streets of the ruined city.
Credit: E. Bouvet / ICRC



Sierra Leone, 2000.
Kroo Bay Camp, Freetown. The daily life of a displaced person.
Credit: U. Meissner / ICRC



Afghanistan, 2001.
Deh Mazang, Kabul. Children on a carousel at the end of Ramadan (Eid).
Credit: N. Danziger / ICRC



Iraq, 2003.
Basra. The inhabitants no longer able to get water from the mains supply sometimes have to resort to making holes in the nearest pipes.
Credit: T. Gassmann / ICRC



Yugoslavia, 1999.
Novi Sad. "Pont de la Liberté" destroyed by bombing.
Credit: B. Heger / ICRC



*In the face of
all this, ICRC
delegates have
been able to
provide little more
than what one
official describes
as a drop of
humanity in an
ocean of horror.*



Quote from an audio excerpt in Kigali, 1994.
(Reference: V-S-12601-A-01)



RESPONSE



*... We have tried again to go out
and evacuate the injured, but we
realised that this is still not
possible because of the checkpoints
controlled by the militia...*



Quote from an audio excerpt in Kigali, 1991.
(Reference: V-S-12601-A-01)

“Despite press reports to the contrary, [ICRC] activities are continuing in Grozny.” (ICRC news release, 13 December 1995)

The humanitarian response in cities at war depends on the stage and intensity of the conflict. During active hostilities, the first task is to provide direct relief in response to the violence. After a mortar shell exploded in Sarajevo’s central market in February 1994, the ICRC immediately distributed surgical supplies and blood bags to the city’s main hospitals to help treat the wounded.

When breaks in the fighting leave some room to manoeuvre, humanitarian workers endeavour to improve inhabitants’ day-to-day living conditions by providing food and clean water, as the ICRC did in Grozny in 1995.

In addition to meeting basic needs, the ICRC also works to ease the psychological pain caused by separation and imprisonment. In times of “peace”, response efforts mainly focus on rebuilding infrastructure and services (buildings, water systems, electricity and telecommunications) along with reuniting families, searching for missing persons, providing psychosocial support to the families of the missing, and offering microcredit to help restore livelihoods.



The ICRC seeks to establish whether people affected by conflict can cover their essential needs sustainably. If they cannot, we step in to help protect lives and restore livelihoods.



We ensure that people affected by conflict can get basic health care that meets universally recognized standards. This may involve supporting existing health services or temporarily replacing them.

The ICRC works to deliver practical first-aid training to communities, ensuring they are equipped with life-saving knowledge and skills and the confidence to act when needed.

We aim to ensure humane treatment and conditions of detention for all detainees, regardless of the reasons for their arrest and detention. We also seek to alleviate the suffering of their families, particularly by restoring communication between detainees and their relatives.



The ICRC provides water in conflict zones and creates or maintains a sustainable living environment. Ultimately, this work reduces death and suffering due to damage to infrastructure or disruption to water supplies.



Afghanistan, 2016.

Mazar-i-Sharif, ICRC orthopaedic centre. 85% of the center employees are former patients. The centre has been operational since 1991.

Credit: A. Quilty / ICRC



Germany, 1914-1918.

Dresden. German military hospital.

Credit: ICRC archives



United Kingdom, 1941.

London. Paediatric clinic bombed by German planes.

Credit: UK Red Cross



Syria, 2012.

Hospital in Al Shaar, Aleppo. An attack on the city had just killed 50 people and injured another 197, many of them children.

Credit: R. Garcia Vilanova / ICRC



Romania, 1945.

Bucharest. Emergency convoy of ICRC trucks.

Credit: ICRC archives



Bangladesh, 1972.

Dhaka during the Indo-Pakistan conflict. An ICRC delegate in a bombed house.

Credit: J.-J. Kurz / ICRC



Viet Nam, 1968.

Saigon. A neighbourhood destroyed during the second offensive in May, southwest of the Y bridge at Cholon.

Credit: C. Escher / ICRC



Yemen, 2015.

Sawan district, Sana'a. An ICRC team assesses the damage caused by the fighting.

Credit: T. Glass / ICRC



Democratic Republic of the Congo, 2009.

ICRC family-reunification programme. Roger Bimael, 17, who became separated from his family during the fighting, is finally reunited with his loved ones.

Credit: R. Haviv / ICRC



Honduras, 2015.

Marcala City, La Paz Penal Centre. ICRC employees speak with female detainees.

Credit: J. Cornejo / ICRC



Somalia, 2016.

Baidoa, central prison. During an ICRC detention-programme visit, an ICRC employee and his interpreter conduct an interview with a group of detainees to learn more about their living conditions.

Credit: P. Yazdi / ICRC



Switzerland, 1939-1945.

ICRC warehouse in Basel. Employees make British relief packages. A huge pile of parcels can be seen in the background.

Credit: ICRC



Iraq, 2016.

Anbar, near Ramadi. The ICRC provides food, cooking utensils, and hygiene and other relief items to over 400 displaced families.

Credit: A. Awadalla / ICRC



Yemen, 2014.

Abyan, Al Radoo. Participants in an ICRC livelihood project learn all about beekeeping.

Credit: B. Lamon / ICRC



Central African Republic, 2010.

Obo, Haut Mbomou province. Three newly arrived trucks carrying hoes, groundnuts, groundnut seeds, salt, oil and corn are unloaded.

Credit: M. Kokic / ICRC



Abkhazia; Georgia, 1997.

Sukhumi city centre. The Prospekt Mira canteen set up by the ICRC.

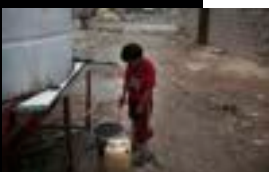
Credit: B. Heger / ICRC



Spain, 1939.

Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War 1936–1939. Milk donated by the Swiss Red Cross is distributed.

Credit: ICRC archives



Iraq, 2011.

Sadr City, Baghdad. A child fills containers with drinking water provided by an ICRC project.

Credit: E. Ou / Getty Images / ICRC

SARAJEVO

11 September 1995



Reading of a Red Cross message written by a
Sarajevo child to its mother.

SPEAKER UNKNOWN

IN ENGLISH

REFERENCE: V-S-14553-A-01
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MOVING FORWARD

Urban areas have become much larger and more densely populated because of significant inward migration to cities over the past 20 years. At the same time, armed conflicts are increasingly fought in urban areas, putting civilians in towns and cities at greater risk of displacement, injury and death.

Through our work in cities such as Gaza, Homs, Mogadishu and Aden, the ICRC has unfortunately become all too familiar with the severe humanitarian consequences of urban warfare: the direct harm to civilians, long-term damage to essential infrastructure and protracted and repeated urban displacement.

International humanitarian law speaks very clearly on the obligation to protect civilians and civilian objects during armed

conflict. Belligerents have to take into account the specific challenges posed by urban warfare, such as the vulnerability of large numbers of people, the interconnectedness of essential services and the cumulative impact of the direct and indirect effects of attacks, in particular in protracted conflicts.

The ICRC continues to call on all parties to armed conflicts to avoid the use of urban areas for military purposes to the greatest possible extent, in particular the use of explosive devices in densely populated areas.





THE ICRC'S WORK IN IRAQ



Iraq IN FOCUS

In Iraq, the ICRC helps displaced people, refugees, and civilians in areas affected by fighting. We improve access to clean water and health care, visit detainees and enable them to maintain contact with their families, and support the authorities' efforts to clarify the fate of people missing from earlier conflicts.

www.icrc.org/en/where-we-work/middle-east/iraq

WAR IN CITIES



International Review of the Red Cross

Volume 98 Number 901

War in cities

www.icrc.org/en/international-review/war-in-cities

Conference Cycle 2017: War in cities

The Conference Cycle is a series of high-level public events and expert meetings organized by the ICRC in Geneva, abroad and online.

www.icrc.org/en/war-in-cities

I saw my city die

A special report by the ICRC on urban warfare in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

cityatwar.icrc.org





MISSION

The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.



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