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31st International Conference of the Red Cross Red Crescent
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31st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

Workshop – Preparing for and Responding to Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence

Co-sponsored by

The Colombian and Canadian Red Cross Societies with support from the ICRC

28 November 2011: 5 p.m. - 7 p.m.

Room B, International Conference Centre, Geneva

Chair: Mr Conrad Sauvé, Secretary-General, Canadian Red Cross

Rapporteur: Ms Isabelle Daoust, Senior Adviser, Strategic Partnerships, Canadian Red Cross

Aim

The objective of this workshop was to discuss the resolution adopted at the Council of Delegates on 26 November 2011, entitled 'National Societies Preparing for and Responding to Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence'; specifically, to share the responses of National Societies (NS) in various contexts, and to discuss some of the obstacles in their way and possible solutions, as well as the role of governments to support NS in meeting their statutory responsibilities.

Summary

The panellists' presentations and the discussion that followed emphasized the need for all NS to enter into a dialogue with their governments to build confidence and trust that would eventually lead to the establishment of negotiated and clearly defined roles and responsibilities for both of them during armed conflicts and other situations of violence. Some participants drew attention to the need to ensure that governments understood and respected the importance for NS to be able to reach all those affected by an armed conflict or some other situation of violence, at all times; this would also enable NS to carry out their auxiliary role. It was also absolutely necessary to apply the Fundamental Principles at all times within the framework of an operation, in order to gain and maintain safe access to the people affected and the communities in need. There is a pressing need for further guidance for NS, and for tools and processes to support their preparation for and response to armed conflict and other situations of violence.

Opening remarks: Mr Walter Cotte, Director-General, Colombian Red Cross and Yves Daccord, Director-General, ICRC

- Both NS and the ICRC have to be prepared to respond to chronic conflicts and to sudden eruptions of violence that can evolve into something long lasting; we operate in a rapidly changing environment and we have to change with it, individually and collectively.
- We may need new ways of working together as a Movement, and with governments as well.
- Every NS has a responsibility to respond to the humanitarian needs created by armed conflict or other situations of violence, but its exact role will depend on what it negotiates with its State. Communities expect their NS to respond.
- NS are on the front lines, responding every day, and they need strong support, in preparing for and conducting their operations, from Movement components, particularly the ICRC, which has a great deal of experience in working safely in these situations of violence.
- Working closely with communities is essential not only in preparing for and responding to situations of violence, but also in the recovery phase, when those affected have to be helped to regain their rights and their dignity so that the cycle of violence can be broken.

Panellists

Mr George Kettaneh, Director of Operations and Disasters and Emergency Medical Services,
Lebanese Red Cross

Mr Dev Dhakhwa, Secretary-General, Nepal Red Cross Society

Ms Asne Havelid, Secretary-General, Norwegian Red Cross

Panel highlights

- Challenges related to public perceptions and access do exist, and may be due to a lack of awareness of NS' mandates and working procedures among key stakeholders; there are other challenges as well, but they can be overcome and access to people and communities made safer. But that requires strong NS leadership, the development of strategies (such as emblem misuse campaigns), the training of staff and volunteers and the development of operational tools to guide responses to armed conflict and other situations of violence. This will enable NS to reach people with the sole objective of providing humanitarian assistance when States might not be able to do so.
- Situations of violence with consequences of humanitarian concern can arise anywhere and at any time and all NS should actively prepare themselves for such eventualities.
- Rigorous application of the Fundamental Principles within the framework of operations is one of the keys to winning acceptance. The neutrality of volunteers must be ensured, as this is a matter of

trust between communities, governments and National Societies. An NS is not an NGO; it has a special status as an auxiliary to the government.

- For NS to carry out their auxiliary role, mutual trust between themselves and their States is essential; it is no less important that States understand their mandate and role in armed conflict and other situations of violence. NS must negotiate their role with their governments, so that the latter accept and facilitate their mandate in these situations. NS must also have clearly defined statutes that reflect their mandate: this is crucial.
- Sound Movement contingency planning, communication and coordination are essential for an effective response.

Highlights of the discussion

- In armed conflict and other situations of violence, NS might sometimes need to ensure that they are not perceived to be too closely linked to the government, if that would impede access. However, NS must, at all times, fulfil their auxiliary role and must have transparent communication and cooperation with the government.
- Laws to protect the emblem, capture NS' legal base, protect staff, and provide insurance for responders are important; but it is just as important that people know these laws and abide by them.
- In Colombia, the Colombian Red Cross, the ICRC and the government work together very well. The government has made much progress in searching for peaceful solutions and examining the root causes of conflict; it has also improved its ability to prepare for and respond to crises.
- It was suggested that the data on the effectiveness of conflict preparedness measures in reducing the impact of conflict on the population be studied (e.g. How many lives can be saved by each rupee invested in disaster risk reduction?).
- Long-term education is a vital preventive strategy; it could include, in the same package, international humanitarian law, humanitarian values, the Fundamental Principles and humanitarian diplomacy, as well as psychosocial support and first aid.
- A representative of a State mentioned that although the State and the NS were independent of each other, it was essential that they listen to each other, maintain a dialogue and have a joint understanding of the problem; if they fail to do all this, the necessary solutions would neither be found nor be implemented.
- Confidence-building measures and transparency between governments and NS is absolutely vital; the Colombian Red Cross can serve as a model in this regard.
- Transparency is an important element in ensuring that the NS is respected by all parties. As a conflict evolves, so might the role of the NS and its relationship with its government, which it may need to renegotiate. An NS must play a role complementary to that of the government. Contingency

plans are required. Regular contacts must be made with authorities, insisting always that the independence of the NS must be respected.

- To know how to deal with violence and to be able to develop pertinent policy and legislation you have to have lived through it.
- How do we ensure that NS are consciously accepting their role, especially to respond to unpredictable events?
- Recruitment, selection and training practices for volunteers are crucial: these people are the public face of the NS and responsible in some degree for the reputation or public image of the NS. They should be representative of the community the NS serves.
- New challenges are emerging, such as urban violence involving youth. NS would benefit from further guidance in ascertaining their roles in these situations and best practices for dealing with them. How can NS help to mitigate or prevent these situations?
- The ICRC will work with NS and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to develop a practical guide to better prepare and respond to Armed Conflict and Other Situations of Violence.