



COMITÉ INTERNATIONAL DE LA CROIX-ROUGE

**HANDLING INFORMATION IN HUMANITARIAN OPERATIONS WITHIN ARMED CONFLICTS:
THE ICRC'S APPROACH**

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Carl von Clausewitz, in his book "On War", said in 1831: "A great part of the information obtained in war is contradictory, a still greater part is false, and by far the greatest part is of doubtful character".

The handling of humanitarian action and information in conflicts is indeed a complex and delicate matter. In natural disasters, help can be organized and brought in simply by taking into account publicly available information and the evaluation of humanitarian needs. While in natural disasters humanitarian action is not seen as an external intervention, in times of conflict suspicion immediately arises that there is an attempt to interfere by humanitarian means or to give advantage to one or the other party to the conflict.

The operational approach has therefore to be rigorous and transparent, to be thoroughly prepared even before the outbreak of the conflict and to be conducted in a coherent and predictable way.

For decades, the ICRC used to be the only international humanitarian actor in conflict areas, having a mandate based on the Geneva Conventions to protect and assist non-combatants in times of conflict. Other international agencies and NGOs worked in the safer neighbouring zones, especially taking care of the refugees.

During the last decade, other organizations such as UN Agencies and some NGOs started to

be active in some conflicts and had to learn that working within the areas affected by the conflict is completely different from conducting humanitarian activities in a safe context.

I think that it is useful first of all to make some general remarks concerning the key characteristics of humanitarian action in armed conflicts. This will give us a better understanding of the problem of handling information, which is the subject of my talk.

The ICRC's approach is often not well understood by other actors and partners. It is sometimes seen as stubborn or even dull. We are aware of this. But nevertheless we think that we have to stick to this approach, which has so often proven its efficacy. I would like to give some elements which may explain the necessity for the ICRC to maintain a firm approach in operations and in handling information.

The most important problem in today's complex conflicts is the so-called "politicization" of humanitarian action. The respective roles of politicians, generals and humanitarian actors are not clear anymore. It seems to be difficult, sometimes even impossible, for governments to find a realistic consensus on political and military options and actions. Humanitarian action provides a welcome focal point, a sense of purpose. Since nobody contests the need for humanitarian aid, as would be the case for political or military interventions, humanitarian action helps to ease the pressure put on governments by the international and national media, and by public opinion, which increasingly dictates today's agenda of priorities and creates a political need to act immediately. It is therefore not surprising that large-scale international humanitarian activities are usually deployed only in the few conflicts which are in the

headlines, while the ICRC has currently to be active in 30 conflict areas, many of them as disastrous in terms of humanitarian consequences as those in the headlines but neglected if not "forgotten" by the international community.

In conflicts with excessive media coverage, humanitarian action often is or is at least perceived as being used as an alternative means of achieving political ends, as an opportunistic extension of foreign policy.

This perception jeopardizes the identity and the efficacy of humanitarian aid. If humanitarian aid is meant to be effective in a conflict, it has to be accepted by all parties to the conflict and has to reach all the victims. This means that it has to be constantly negotiated in order to be perceived as being completely neutral, impartial and independent. It has to be delivered by neutral, impartial and independent organizations. The States were completely aware of this necessity when they drew up and signed the Geneva Conventions, which stipulate this neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian assistance.

"Neutral and impartial" - in the meantime, most of the humanitarian agencies use these words in order to define their identity. But the important question is not whether an organization really is or declares itself to be neutral and impartial. What counts is the perception of an organization by the different actors in the conflict. Humanitarian UN Agencies, for example, certainly see themselves as neutral and impartial bodies. But acting under the same blue emblem as the UN blue helmets, they are not necessarily perceived as being independent and neutral. If UN troops are seen as enemies by one or another actor in the conflict, all those

who work under the same flag and emblem risk falling into the same category. This perception of dependence and partiality jeopardizes humanitarian work in general and the safety of all humanitarian field workers.

For these reasons, the ICRC tries to avoid any possible confusion with political and military action. How would an ICRC delegate be perceived by one of the warring parties if he were seen in an ICRC vehicle together with an armed combatant of the other party? The ICRC has learned by experience that it is credible only if perceived as being absolutely independent. It is sometimes said that the ICRC is obsessed by the idea of its independence. Being independent is of course not an objective in itself. But our experience shows that often the international caravan passes on - as in Afghanistan - and we have to remain on the spot in the long term in order to continue fulfilling our international mandate. Or, for instance, we are called upon to take care of blue helmets captured by a party to the conflict, as in Somalia. Such tasks can only be realized if the ICRC is seen to be independent and apolitical. For the same reason, the delegates of the ICRC cannot at the same time bring assistance and protection to the civilians, the prisoners and the wounded and also act as judge or even as prosecutor. Having such tasks would be seen as very dangerous by the parties to the conflict, who would do anything to avoid witnesses and would consequently not allow access to those in need.

I hope that these general remarks have helped you to understand more clearly the ICRC's very specific approach, which is based on its experience in almost all the conflicts of the last

decades. The same rigorous approach is essential for the handling of information in humanitarian operations in armed conflicts.

The ICRC has indeed a unique network of information gathering. Sixty delegations cover the planet. In most of the conflict areas - currently about 30 - the ICRC is present with an operational delegation and as many subdelegations and offices as necessary, positioned all over the conflict region. By using communication means such as radio, mail, telephone, fax, satellite systems and E-mail the 7000-strong ICRC staff produced in 1993 more than one million written communications, not to mention the millions of oral communications. The ICRC's radio network alone includes some 1600 HF stations and some 3300 VHF stations. The ICRC is now introducing an E-mail system. It will connect its 60 delegations with its headquarters, and the latter with a large number of users of the ICRC's public information data bases, such as National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, governments, UN Agencies and NGOs.

Why does the ICRC need its own worldwide information gathering system instead of relying completely on public sources of information?

I think Clausewitz's statement is, *cum grano salis*, still valid today and can be confirmed by the ICRC's experience.

If information handling is to be useful for policy-making and for taking operational decisions, the information must be as complete as possible and of a high standard of credibility.

As I already mentioned, the mandate of the ICRC is to provide protection and assistance to victims of conflict in situations of armed confrontation of an international and non-international character and in the event of internal disturbances. Those are situations in which information and the political interpretation of news is a strategic resource of its own, a matter bearing possible direct effects on conflict development. News about military capabilities, about the morale of the troops, about the economy and public opinion in war times is crucial. It will always be in the center of the speculations of military specialists, politicians and journalists. However, data collected by humanitarian organizations about the number of wounded and dead, captured and missing military personnel are also worth knowing; these figures allow for a number of deductions and speculations on military force and morale. Facts about the nutritional and medical state of health of the population may provide indications as to a nation's economic and social strength. Humanitarian organizations and their personnel have difficulties in gaining access to the places and the victims of conflict, not only because they gather information on the spot, or because they become observers of changing military situation, but because their very activity gives an insight into the course of events. Therefore, even though the Geneva Conventions provide the ICRC with a mandate for humanitarian activities, especially with regard to prisoners of war, tracing of missing persons and assistance, in each and every conflict the ICRC has to battle to get access to the victims and to remain with them as long as needed.

With regard to news coverage of conflicts and the use of public opinion by warring parties, not all conflicts have known the same strategic use of information as a resource; not all belligerents have the same political sense, not all have the economic means for the handling

of news, even of false news. Therefore, Clausewitz' maxim has to be slightly adapted. One would have to classify wars with the maximum degree of secrecy - the so-called hidden wars - at the one end and at the other end those with unlimited access for journalists. But even the wars with total news coverage would have to be differentiated: those with open access without censorship and those in which the armies in presence are resorting to the total news war, battling with the media people to manipulate events or to hide other developments away. The Gulf War and the conflict in the former Yugoslavia are examples which have been scrutinized several times. I do not have to go into further detail. Incomplete or manipulated information may aggravate or dissimulate the humanitarian consequences of war and cannot be used as a basis for a coherent operational approach. Even worse: such information may lead to the killing of thousands as we all know, the latest example being "Radio Mille Collines" in Rwanda.

Despite these critical remarks, let me pay tribute to a great many journalists and reporters who have pointed their finger at the right time at crucial issues, who have sometimes paid with their health or even with their life their bravery and ideal of trustworthy, truthful news.

I indicate these facts only to confirm a policy the ICRC has developed, based on its long experience: only by having its own representatives on the front lines of conflict zones is the ICRC able to assess for itself the plight of the victims; only in these circumstances is the institution capable of maintaining contacts and building relations with the warring parties; and only by being in the field will delegates be in a position to obtain information which is as objective as possible. The ICRC therefore always works with its own sources.

Why is direct information so crucial? Let me stress a few points concerning public sources.

Everyday public news and general information of a political or military nature are rarely of direct and immediate importance to the ICRC at headquarters level. Because the ICRC has a mandate to provide humanitarian protection and relief, it needs facts indicating frequencies of casualties, places and numbers of arrests and the victims' needs in general. The selection and evaluation of such information cannot be done properly at headquarters, nor even in the capitals of the countries affected by conflict. That work cannot be carried out on the sole basis of press clippings. You need to have people in the field to carry out such assessments - the 60 delegations are the ICRC's neurons, the 7000 delegates and employees in the field the sensory cells which register events and victims. Here I want to make a comparison with natural disasters. News about earthquakes and hurricanes in general are sufficiently accurate, objective, trustworthy to provide the means for action. In natural catastrophes, the degree of sensitivity of the news is not the same as in conflicts. With few exceptions, there are generally no hidden agendas in news coverage provided on disasters.

Publicly available news almost never reflects the complete picture of a conflict. The media tend to emphasize spectacular events, all focusing on the same subject at the same time. This gives a very sectorial picture of an ongoing war.

Besides, media usually report on one or two conflict situations at a time and not on the more than 30 others prevailing on this planet, in which the ICRC has to work.

Nevertheless, media news are relevant for the ICRC, not so much as a source - the ICRC is often already in possession of those facts - but as an indicator of the quality of our own information and field work.

But the media, and especially the printed media, as well as other analytical public sources, have a greater importance in providing background and analytical information. In-depth analysis of conflict developments and possible scenarios of wars are important elements for control of decision-making and planning in the longer term by ICRC policy makers.

Let me now take up the process of gathering and circulating information inside the ICRC and subsequently sharing this information with others.

I have indicated that the ICRC delegations in the world and its delegates in the field are the eyes and ears of the institution. Their work consists in maintaining contacts with people in power, opposition groups and a whole range of local NGOs which are relevant to actual or possible humanitarian work; in a word, people who have influence on conflict developments, be they inside a country or a prison, in a combat zone, or even abroad. These contacts feed the early warning system in regions where tensions prevail and prepare the network in view of an outbreak of a conflict in which the ICRC needs to have access to all possible parties and to all victims.

Delegates need those contacts to ascertain that people at war will agree to allow humanitarian work be carried out, in accordance with the ICRC's principles of impartiality, independence

and neutrality. Let me just stress, here, that despite the universality of the Geneva Conventions the custom that assistance shall be provided to one's enemy does not exist in all cultural areas. In situations such as Somalia or Rwanda, the maintenance of the network of contacts will take as much of your time as effective relief operations. Thus it is an essential part of a delegate's work.

Furthermore, delegates need those contacts in order to explain to the different leaders the reasons for visiting detention places, for the work of the Central Tracing Agency and for the launching of relief operations. Delegates will use those leaders' influence to prevent violations of basic rules of humanitarian law. Especially in civil wars, there is a need to keep decision-makers informed about the delegates' findings and the allegations they have heard. Furthermore, every opportunity is used to spread knowledge of the necessary "management of violence", and the need to refrain from indiscriminate use of weaponry.

Finally, delegates need the network of contacts for their own safety. Parallel to the acceptance of the principles of relief operations, they have to ascertain that the function and significance of the Red Cross emblem as a protective sign is recognized and fully understood and that abuses are known and condemned.

By discussing all these issues with political and military personalities, with church and human rights leaders, delegates gain immense insight into the dynamics of a conflict and the real dimensions of human suffering. By having access to the victims who have been injured and hospitalized or driven out of a conflict area, by visiting detainees or families affected by

terror or military confrontations, by arrests and destruction, delegates are progressively able to assess and evaluate the evolution of casualties and the degree of destitution of the society.

Finally, ICRC delegations often use a great number of local employees who are never as naive as they would like you to consider them. Whereas ICRC delegates have often, especially at the outbreak of a conflict, to dissipate suspicion that they are someone's spies, so do delegates never forget that no delegation in a authoritarian state is ever free of some employees who have obligations towards other employers. Therefore delegates know that the opinions expressed by some local employees are never without weight and significance.

Information gathered in this way is discussed in the field delegations and is shared with its subdelegations. This firsthand information is a crucial operational element for the planning of operations by the head of delegation. He then decides what has to be transmitted to headquarters in the form of situation reports, proposals for protection and relief programmes, explanatory notes on particular events, statistical reports, debriefings by satellite phone or any other means of information-sharing with those in charge at headquarters of operations carried out in the given country.

Depending on the importance of the decision to be taken, the issue is treated at the level of a deskperson, by the delegate general responsible for a geographical zone, the director of operations or the Executive Board. For each level, the documents receive a new form, the information is reworked in order to meet the specific needs of the decision-making body.

It would be going into far too much detail to outline the working methods of all these levels and bodies. The principle is the selective bottom-up information process based on detailed information coming in from the field. At each level a cross-check is done with information gathered from public sources, other organisations, governments, individuals. This procedure allows for the best use of information in the process of operational decision-making.

The huge quantity of information flowing from the delegations to headquarters is not only used in the policy-guiding and decision-making process. Specialised services rearrange and rewrite it in order to provide governments and National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the media and public opinion with relevant news on humanitarian situations and ICRC responses to the needs of the victims. This presentation reflects the principles the ICRC follows when speaking out about conflicts: its staff is trained to provide information on activities carried out to improve the situation of people in need. Staff has to refrain from describing general observations made in the field or publicly analyzing the root causes of a conflict. The first restraint is due to the sensitivity of the issue whereas the second one is necessary because any analysis of causes is subject to debate with parties to a conflict.

By sharing sensitive information coming clearly from a source which can easily be identified the ICRC, since it is often the only witness on the spot, could jeopardize access to the victims, the safety of our delegates and the long term credibility of the institution.

There is, however, one exception to this vital rule. If there is a grave violation of international humanitarian law directly witnessed by the ICRC and if confidential demarches

victims, the safety of our delegates and the long term credibility of the institution.

There is, however, one exception to this vital rule. If there is a grave violation of international humanitarian law directly witnessed by the ICRC and if confidential demarches do not correct an unacceptable situation, the ICRC goes public. It informs governments and the media about the facts and may publicly ask for intervention by the States party to the Geneva Conventions.

To conclude my talk, I would like to repeat that the gathering of information by the ICRC's own delegates is essential for it to set up an efficient plan of action. Publicly available information is regularly cross-checked and integrated in our analysis. In sharing information, the ICRC has to be very critical and has to share only information relevant to the humanitarian situation. It has to resist the pressure which is put on it to share political or military information gathered through its field information network if it wants to remain credible and acceptable to all parties to the conflict. The ICRC is not an information agency but has the one and only task of directly protecting and assisting the victims of conflicts. Therefore the ICRC asks for the understanding of all those who think that it is too discreet and too independent. But its discretion and independence are what allow the ICRC to be very often the only hope for the victims and the only guarantee for the safety of its delegates.

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