

# MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT



K. Cook-Pellegrin/ICRC

In 2015, the world was finally forced to sit up and take notice of the global impact of the humanitarian crises that have been unfolding in the Middle East and other parts of the world for many years now – first, because of the highly mediatized situation of migrants, including refugees and asylum seekers, arriving in Europe, and secondly, because of the surge in violent extremism and its reverberations on international relations and public policies in a great number of countries.

During the year, the arrival on Europe's shores and borders of massive numbers of migrants was symptomatic of one of the most serious ongoing humanitarian problems of our time – one that ultimately calls for a political solution. With the majority of those men, women and children fleeing the armed conflicts in Afghanistan and the Syrian Arab Republic (hereafter Syria) or insecurity in the Horn of Africa – many having seen their homes and livelihoods destroyed, their loved ones killed or injured and their chances of a viable existence in temporary accommodations poor at best – their plight suddenly became harder for the world to ignore. In the absence of political agreements to end the fighting, it became all the more vital to ensure a sustained and principled humanitarian response in the conflict-affected countries and their regional neighbours.

The crisis affecting Europe was just one part of a much bigger picture: countless migrants living in or crossing through countries affected by armed conflict or other situations of violence in various parts of the world, particularly across the Arabian Peninsula, Central America,

the Sahel region of Africa, and South-East Asia, continued to risk their lives in search of safety and a better future for themselves and their families. Addressing the needs and vulnerabilities of people in their countries of origin and along migration routes therefore became a priority for humanitarian action, with almost 80% of ICRC activities and nearly all areas of its growing response focusing on key conflict environments and neighbouring regions.

The palpable spread of violent extremism over the past year – with the increased use of social media networks to promote violence and to radicalize and recruit large numbers of people from around the world to commit atrocities, including on foreign soil – was another stark reminder of the turmoil in the Middle East and other conflict-affected regions. It compounded the effect of widespread violations of IHL and resulted in a prevailing unease that no one is fully immune to the effects of conflicts that may originate on the other side of the globe.

For the ICRC, these trends have manifold implications and pose many challenges. In 2015, several of our biggest operations were conducted in places where violent conflict caused massive displacement of people, within and across national borders. Our operation in Syria was the largest in terms of expenditure for the third successive year, followed by South Sudan, Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia – all of them suffering the effects of protracted armed conflicts, often with regional and even global repercussions. The alarming humanitarian consequences of Yemen's deepening armed conflict, resurging tensions in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory, perennial fighting in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, intensifying violence in Burundi and its repercussions for the Great Lakes region, and the Ukraine conflict were also among our top operational priorities throughout the year. In many of these contexts, we gave our programming a regional dimension in order to mitigate the effects of violence. Through carefully measured growth, the initial field budget of almost CHF 1.4 billion was supplemented with budget extensions for 11 contexts – amounting to an additional CHF 210.3 million – to address the evolving humanitarian needs.

The number, complexity and systemic impact of simultaneous conflict-driven crises around the world – and the epic scale of the humanitarian needs they generated – meant we had to be more pragmatic and innovative than ever to overcome the constraints to the ICRC's neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian approach, while adhering to the Fundamental Principles adopted 50 years ago and demonstrating their continued relevance in such a fast-evolving environment.

In the past year, lack of respect for even the most fundamental rules of IHL by numerous States and non-State armed groups remained an overriding challenge. Flagrant violations – including direct attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure such as hospitals and schools, and disregard for the rules governing humanitarian access – characterized many of the armed conflicts where we worked. A critical issue remained gaining acceptance and access in order to work close to people in need of protection and assistance, on all sides of front lines, and to engage all parties to conflicts. The security risks inherent in this approach were sadly evident, with one staff member killed in Mali in March and two

others in Yemen in September. Four colleagues who had been abducted were still being held at year's end.

In the case particularly of non-State armed groups, the ICRC faces unprecedented challenges in seeking to engage with them in order to gain humanitarian access to vulnerable people in areas under their control. We made strenuous efforts at the policy, strategic and operational levels over the past year – and will continue to do so – to try to deliver an impartial humanitarian response for all those in need and to tackle the ethical and practical dilemmas that may arise in such situations. Front-line humanitarian negotiation in new strategic environments became a key focus of our efforts to enlarge the humanitarian space.

We reiterated the basic message that respect for IHL and the principle of humanity is the single most effective way to reduce suffering in war. We did this at every level, notably at the UN General Assembly in New York, United States of America, and in a joint statement with the UN secretary-general in Geneva, Switzerland, in October. At every opportunity, we highlighted the importance of respecting the key principles guiding the conduct of hostilities, namely distinction, proportionality and precaution; of treating people deprived of their freedom humanely; of stopping the use of illegal weapons and the illegal use of weapons; and of proactively protecting those not or no longer participating in hostilities.

The rise of violent extremism, and the response to it, has likewise posed challenges. It bears repeating that all intentional attacks against non-combatants and all attacks aimed at spreading terror are prohibited under IHL. While the ICRC fully respects the right of States to take lawful measures to prevent attacks on their citizens and to ensure State security, the narrative and some of the practice related to “countering violent extremism” have raised a number of concerns about restrictive measures that may be difficult to monitor and safeguard against, and highlighted dilemmas in balancing military and security necessities with protection issues. Understanding and responding in the most appropriate way to this new reality, while underscoring the relevance of IHL or other applicable legal standards, was and will continue to be one of our global humanitarian diplomacy priorities.

The year also saw the adoption of the new Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, both of which have implications for humanitarian action, particularly in situations of protracted armed conflict or violence. On the humanitarian policy front, the ICRC needed to engage proactively on these issues and offer a clearer understanding of the distinctiveness of humanitarian action, but also of the possibilities of working better with those involved in longer-term stabilization efforts. Other significant areas of concern included the need to strike a better balance between the work of local and international actors, and between private and public efforts to respond to crises.

The 32nd International Conference, held in Geneva in December 2015, brought together representatives from 169 governments, 185 National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the International Federation, the ICRC and more than 100 observers. It was a key opportunity to achieve policy consensus and deliver substantive, concrete

outcomes on a number of issues of pressing humanitarian concern. In the domain of IHL, while States failed to agree on the creation of a formal compliance mechanism, they nevertheless agreed to continue negotiations towards enhancing the implementation of IHL. They also agreed to continue working for stronger legal protection for people detained in relation particularly to non-international armed conflicts. Critical resolutions on Health Care in Danger and sexual and gender-based violence – matters of grave humanitarian concern in many armed conflicts or other emergencies around the world – were adopted, marking significant progress towards enhancing protection in those regards.

At the Council of Delegates, the various components of the Movement demonstrated their commitment to work together, adopting a logo for use in fundraising and promotional activities in specific situations and a resolution strengthening internal coordination and cooperation. More broadly, both meetings provided a unique platform for further strengthening and developing key partnerships within the Movement, and for enhancing joint planning on issues of common interest in conflict- or disaster-affected contexts – an essential consideration if we are to tackle the magnitude and complexity of the humanitarian needs that we face today.



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