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Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for

Refugees, questions relating to refugees, returnees and

displaced persons and humanitarian questions

ICRC statement to the United Nations

New York, November 2013

Please check against delivery
Thank you, Mr. / Madam Chair, for giving the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) the floor.

The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) worldwide shows no sign of abating. This is largely a reflection of the violent and protracted nature of many contemporary conflicts, which trigger new waves of displacement while preventing millions of people from returning for many years, sometimes decades.

This speaks to the need for vigorous political efforts to collectively prevent and resolve conflict, but also to the humanitarian imperative of minimizing the impact of armed conflict on civilians. The ICRC focuses on this latter task, interceding with all parties to a conflict to promote respect for international humanitarian law, and reminding them of their obligations and responsibilities.

By calling for the protection of civilians in situations of armed conflict, and by providing relief and other forms of assistance to communities in need, the ICRC may be able to limit the magnitude of displacement. In certain contexts where there is no realistic alternative to flight, the ICRC and other humanitarian organizations can facilitate the process by providing assistance along the route or at the points of arrival. In 2012, the ICRC provided assistance to some 4.4 million IDPs throughout the world. Recognizing that those uprooted are often particularly at risk, the ICRC will continue to focus on them, alongside host communities and other vulnerable groups.

The role of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies should also be stressed. They are the ICRC’s primary partners and, thanks to their unique position in their respective national contexts, they may have access where other humanitarian players do not, including politically polarized settings where the international community is seen as having taken sides. Their ability to carry out impartial humanitarian action must be recognized and preserved.

Mr / Madam Chair,

The generic term “IDPs” in fact covers people who live in vastly different conditions. Some find themselves in combat zones and in acute danger, but the great majority have been able to reach relative safety, typically in large urban areas. There, they nonetheless face chronic difficulties with inadequate housing, livelihood, education and health care. In many contexts they are viewed as an unbearable burden on local capacities and run the risk of being rejected and marginalized. Thus, the humanitarian response must be tailored to the differing nature of their problems.

In line with its recently developed strategy, the ICRC focuses on those in most urgent need and prioritizes the emergency phase, which is not to say that it rules out responding to other phases of displacement when humanitarian needs are not being met. The initial response typically involves providing essential relief items, restoring family links for those separated by conflict, and, where needed, ensuring that victims of sexual violence have access to appropriate care and support services. Wherever possible, the ICRC also seeks to address the long-term consequences of displacement by bolstering the resilience and self-sufficiency of vulnerable people and communities, and helping them overcome the shock and trauma caused by armed conflict and other situations of violence. Depending on the context, the ICRC may repair rural irrigation systems or urban water supply networks, support health centres or hospitals, distribute improved seed, vaccinate livestock, or launch micro-credit initiatives for female-headed households.
The protracted nature of contemporary conflicts has led the ICRC to adopt a much more systematic approach to early recovery and resilience in its programming. It informs the authorities and development agencies of its activities and seeks their views in order to decide, independently, on the best entry and exit strategies.

The various phases of displacement often overlap. Although people enduring protracted displacement can normally be easily reached, they are often neglected. Development organizations and government agencies are often best placed to respond in such contexts, and the ICRC calls upon those in a position to do so to get involved at an early stage, rather than wait for the conflict to end. In so doing, they should grant IDP communities the same entitlement to development projects and social security programmes as other citizens and host communities. More must also be done to promote other durable solutions, such as return or resettlement, for instance by providing security guarantees, transport assistance and restitution of property.

The development of national legislation, policies and institutional capacities can make a substantial contribution to improving the conditions of persons affected by internal displacement. We take this opportunity to congratulate States that have ratified the Kampala Convention, and encourage other members of the African Union to follow suit. Within its field of competence, ICRC stands ready to lend its support with facilitating the ratification process, reviewing national legislation and engaging in dialogue with interested governments.

Thank you Mr / Madam Chair.