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Advancement of women:

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International Committee of the Red Cross

statement delivered by

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Mr / Madam Chair,

Sexual violence in armed conflict is widespread, yet its prevalence and consequences are vastly underestimated. In its experience on the ground, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) sees the grave and dehumanizing effects on victims, their families and entire communities. Sexual violence can take many forms, including rape, sexual slavery, forced prostitution, forced pregnancy, and forced sterilization. In armed conflict, such acts rarely occur in isolation, often taking place within a wider range of violations, including killing, child recruitment, and destruction of property and looting. Sexual violence can be used as a form of reprisal, to create fear, or as a form of torture. It may also be used systematically, as a method of warfare, aimed at destroying the social fabric.

Rape and other forms of sexual violence are prohibited by human rights law at all times and by international humanitarian law in both international and non-international armed conflict. Rape and other forms of sexual violence that amount to serious violations of international humanitarian law entail individual criminal responsibility and must be prosecuted. All States are obliged to criminalize these violations under domestic law, and to effectively investigate and prosecute any instance of sexual violence.

National justice systems can act as strong deterrents. With trained staff, and with clear and effective sanctions mechanisms, they are equipped to investigate and prosecute crimes. Where such mechanisms are already in place in times of peace, they may also help to prevent the emergence of sexual violence should armed conflict break out? Integrating the prohibition of sexual violence into the operational procedures and policies of armed and security forces, with strong leadership support for such measures, also significantly fosters preventive efforts. It ensures that both individuals and chains of command are held responsible for acts of sexual violence in armed conflict.

Certain women and girls may face a heightened risk of sexual violence. This includes those who are internally displaced, migrants, widows, heads of households, detainees, those associated with armed forces or armed groups, and those of a specific ethnicity. Sexual violence is also perpetrated against men and boys, and in many contexts, detention may render them particularly vulnerable.

Sexual violence can result in severe physical and psychological trauma, HIV infection and, occasionally, death. In addition, victims often face double victimization: sustaining potentially dangerous and long-lasting injuries and trauma, and also facing stigmatization and rejection by their families and communities. Women and girls who become pregnant as a result of rape may seek out unsafe practices to terminate their pregnancy, which can put their lives or health at risk. Children born of rape, and their mothers, often children themselves, are also highly vulnerable, facing an increased risk of exclusion from the community and from access to necessary services.

Victims must have unimpeded access to timely and appropriate health care of a high quality, including comprehensive medical care within 72 hours, mental health services, and psychosocial support in both the acute phase and over the long term. Unfortunately, obtaining access to health care is often a significant challenge for victims, one that is exacerbated by conflict, as medical infrastructure can be limited, damaged or destroyed, and trained staff and medicines are frequently unavailable.
In addition, sexual violence remains invisible in many contexts, as guilt, shame, fear of retaliation, or taboos may prevent victims from coming forward. Thus, it is often very difficult to reach and provide support to victims. Educating communities is vital to reducing the risks of stigmatization, rejection and exclusion of victims, and to fostering an environment in which victims feel able to seek help. Ensuring the security of victims and preventing further attacks are also of the utmost importance.

The ICRC strives to respond to sexual violence in armed conflict and other situations of violence in a multidisciplinary manner. It provides medical and psychosocial care and economic support to victims, engages in activities to minimize risk, and works to prevent sexual violence. Wherever possible, the ICRC works in cooperation with local structures, including National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and non-governmental organizations, to ensure that its response is tailored to the specific contexts in which it works.

Mr / Madam Chair,

Sexual violence continues to be pervasive in armed conflict, and its consequences remain insufficiently addressed. We call on States to prevent, halt and prosecute these violations. The ICRC is committed to enhancing its response to sexual violence in armed conflict and other situations of violence over the next four years. It is determined to expand its programmes to meet the needs of victims of sexual violence and to strengthen its action to prevent such violations.