Plenary: Strengthening of the coordination of humanitarian and disaster relief assistance of the United Nations, including special economic assistance: Strengthening of the coordination of emergency humanitarian assistance of the United Nations

Thank you, Mr President, for giving the floor to the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Improved coordination mechanisms, the development of guidelines and the adoption of new technologies have made it easier over the years for the humanitarian sector to better address the needs and aspirations of vulnerable groups. In recent years, the need to uphold human dignity in all circumstances has also been repeatedly reaffirmed in various fora and through the adoption and ratification of key international legal instruments, including in the field of international humanitarian law.

Despite all this progress, however, from the perspective of civilians affected by armed conflict, the outlook is desperately bleak. 2014 has seen record numbers of people displaced by conflict and other forms of armed violence, reportedly exceeding 50 million for the first time since the Second World War. Although overall humanitarian funding has grown significantly, from 12.4 billion US dollars in 2007 to 22 billion in 2013, the gap between resources and needs has grown even further. At the same time, lack of access – irrespective of the reasons for this – has often left millions of people beyond the reach of even the most basic humanitarian assistance and protection.

Many armed conflicts drag on for years, sometimes decades, while new ones erupt, marked by serious violations of international humanitarian law, such as indiscriminate attacks, direct attacks on civilians (including health-care personnel), and massive destruction of infrastructure and livelihoods. This leads to the flight of skilled workers, chronic poverty and poor prospects for sustainable recovery.

To reverse this negative trend, States have a duty to better prevent and resolve conflicts, and to improve protection and assistance for those caught up in armed violence. Humanitarian actors are concerned only with the latter task, and can only play a subsidiary role.

The ICRC has a mandate to work for the faithful application of international humanitarian law. To this end, it is constantly engaged in confidential discussions with all parties. Its purpose is to secure not only acceptance for its presence based on trust, but also respect for the rules of humanitarian law. Those rules enshrine essential protection for the lives and well-being of civilians, in particular by limiting the effects of hostilities, protecting at-risk individuals, and regulating the delivery of humanitarian assistance.

While the responsibility for complying with humanitarian law lies primarily with the parties to conflict, all States have a role to play in this regard. One way of doing so is to explore new avenues for developing effective compliance mechanisms – an important topic on the agenda of the upcoming International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent at the end of 2015. Most importantly, however, States should demonstrate their political commitment, notably by incorporating humanitarian rules in domestic law and by training their military forces and others who may be called upon to exercise authority in the event of armed conflict. The ICRC further recalls the legal obligation undertaken by all States, when they ratified the four Geneva Conventions of 1949, to respect and ensure respect for those instruments.

Mr President,

Providing an adequate response to the magnitude and complexity of humanitarian needs generated by contemporary conflicts requires a holistic response and the active involvement of a wide range of actors.

The ICRC is committed to engaging with all humanitarian and development actors that are actively and effectively helping to improve the lives of people affected by conflict. Our ambition
is also to help ensure that the overall humanitarian response is coherent and effective. The aim is not for all humanitarian actors to behave in the same way, but rather to draw on their individual strengths while fully respecting their respective mandates and expertise.

For the ICRC, a humanitarian response is best served by maintaining distinct humanitarian coordination processes whereby actors operate side by side in a spirit of complementarity and collective responsibility. We see the added value of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in its unique network of global and local humanitarian actors working in accordance with the same Fundamental Principles, with access to those who are vulnerable and in need of protection and assistance, whether as a result of armed conflict, natural disaster, or other causes. With its wide-ranging expertise that covers almost all domains of humanitarian action, the Movement is striving to improve its own coordination mechanisms. The ICRC is committed to being a driving and inspiring force in this process, and we look forward to reporting on this in greater detail next year at the 32nd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent.

Mr President,

Humanitarian coordination has value only in so far as it translates into effective protection and assistance on the ground. This in turn means that humanitarian workers must have access to people in conflict areas and be able to engage with all the belligerents. Unfortunately, this is becoming more and more difficult. Recent years have seen profound changes in the way conflicts are waged, with ever increasing dangers for all humanitarian workers deployed in the field, be they from the UN system, the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, or local or international NGOs.

The same holds true for health-care personnel. Over the last two and a half years, the ICRC has recorded 2,400 violent incidents against health-care workers and facilities in 23 countries around the world. This means that entire communities are being deprived of essential health services. The ICRC and other components of the Movement have raised this matter with a number of States, medical associations and other stakeholders, and we are encouraged to see that there is widespread support for this cause and that steps are being taken on a number of fronts to improve the situation.

Humanitarian workers are well aware that operating in conflict settings is inherently dangerous and will always entail certain risks to their safety. But it is unacceptable that they be deliberately targeted by those seeking to gain a political, military or economic advantage. Such acts are flagrant violations of international humanitarian law, and we must all do everything in our power to prevent them.

For States, this includes the duty to investigate and bring to justice the suspected perpetrators. States must also seek to avoid blurring the line between political and military initiatives, on the one hand, and humanitarian action, on the other. Failing to do so risks politicizing humanitarian action, undermining the trust of the parties engaged in the conflict in such action and thereby further jeopardizing the safety and acceptance of humanitarian workers and their ability to reach and protect affected communities. In polarized settings, the ICRC will insist on upholding and foregrounding its unique identity as a strictly neutral, independent and impartial humanitarian organization. This is essential if we are to reach victims on all sides.

For humanitarian organizations, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to managing security risks. Some emphasize physical protection alongside armed escorts, or try to operate from a safe distance, using local staff, private contractors or local partners to implement their programmes. For its part, the ICRC has in certain exceptional cases resorted to some of these measures, but puts a much greater emphasis on being accepted by all sides as a means of ensuring the safety of its staff. In our opinion, no amount of modern technology or so-called “remote control” can substitute for direct and regular contact with beneficiaries, weapon-bearers and the authorities controlling the areas where we operate. This proximity with affected communities affords us a clear understanding of people’s needs, aspirations, and physical and
psychological well-being, as well as of the causes and consequences of any protection problems that may arise. Close contact with all relevant armed forces and organized armed groups allows us to pursue a confidential dialogue, through which the ICRC can bring humanitarian issues to their attention and call upon them to take corrective measures.

Building and maintaining such acceptance is a continual endeavour. In the ICRC’s experience, licence to operate hinges not only on upholding the Fundamental Principles, but also demonstrating on a daily basis that we are making a real difference to people’s lives.

National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies abide by the Movement’s Fundamental Principles and are the ICRC’s primary partners. Their volunteers are often the first to arrive on the scene, and we have daily proof of their remarkable dedication and courage in performing their humanitarian mission. Given their unique operational capacity and understanding of local conditions, National Societies are often the preferred partners of UN agencies as well, particularly in polarized settings where the UN agencies struggle to operate freely due to a lack of acceptance and security. The ICRC welcomes such cooperation when it can help deliver desperately needed relief, but underlines the importance of not overstretching the National Societies’ capacities, and above all not undermining their acceptance as neutral organizations. To this end, their cooperation must be tailored to avoid giving the impression that National Societies operate under the authority of UN agencies. Governments must also grant National Societies sufficient autonomy for them to be able to carry out their humanitarian mission in accordance with the Fundamental Principles.

Mr President,

The basic assumption that humanitarian actors who adhere to humanitarian principles will be granted access is increasingly being challenged on a variety of fronts. Some governments see humanitarian action as a threat to their sovereignty, despite the fact that existing humanitarian law strikes a balance between sovereignty concerns and the imperatives of humanitarian assistance. Similarly, some non-State actors suspect humanitarian organizations of having a political or military agenda. A growing number question the validity of our humanitarian principles or the approach that should underpin our action. In all these cases, the result is obstacles to acceptance and access, whether in the form of visas being denied and other administrative hurdles, thwarted attempts to contact leaders with decision-making authority, outright refusals to allow independent humanitarian action to go ahead, or even threats and violence against our staff. Because the consequences of this are so dire for those who depend on humanitarian relief, it is imperative that the international community redouble its efforts to reach a renewed political consensus backing apolitical humanitarian action.

To conclude, Mr President, in order to improve protection and impartial humanitarian assistance that we seek to provide, it is essential that States and humanitarian actors alike recognize the serious nature of the current state of affairs, voice their concerns and engage in a constructive dialogue on possible solutions. It is our hope that the forthcoming World Humanitarian Summit will further this dialogue and lead to tangible progress. The Summit should not focus solely on technical and peripheral issues, but instead address the major factors in the current erosion of humanitarian endeavour. The ICRC, in its capacity as a neutral and independent humanitarian actor, stands ready to take an active part in the discussions aimed at clarifying the purpose and relevancy of future humanitarian action.

Last year we celebrated the 150th anniversary of the founding of the ICRC and of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. This year is the 150th anniversary of the original Geneva Convention, which was adopted to improve the condition of the sick and the wounded in war. As the nature of armed conflict evolved, subsequent generations were inspired to continue developing humanitarian law and the protection and assistance available for the victims. Today, we have a shared responsibility to take up that mantle.

Thank you, Mr President.