

2021 first regular session of the Executive Board

Virtual session

Mr Peter Maurer, President of the International Committee of the Red Cross

Thank you very much, President. Dear David, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, it is great to be back at the Executive Board of the World Food Programme, and I really wanted to appreciate all the discussions that you have already had and I am humbled to see what kind of interactions you have, so my modest contributions over the next 15/20 minutes will just be an add-on to many things which I have already heard this morning.

Unsurprisingly, 2020 has been, for many of us, a year like no other year. Unprecedented in recent years with a pandemic which has affected every person in every country, very differently impacted, as we know, amplifying and exacerbating people's and countries' existing vulnerabilities.

I think the President of the Board in his introduction has said it very crisply. The convergence of conflict, COVID-19 and climate change, which come on top of protracted underdevelopment, economic insecurity, pandemic corruption, protracted inequalities and inequities in societies between countries has really left us with humanitarian needs dramatically increasing.

Humanitarian needs have many aspects. You as the World Food Programme, you have focused in your mandate on all aspects of food insecurity. ICRC for almost 160 years has always maintained the approach of a multi-faceted and multidisciplinary aspect to humanitarian assistance and protection.

We have always tried not to be a specialized organization on one specific issue, but look at the overall picture of humanitarian needs, and particularly, in the very fragile contexts in which we operate and that is where ICRC and the World Food Programme so often see converging trends coming together, and also where we can exploit and explore our complementarities and work together really very efficiently.

If David says all these undeserved praising words to me, I can reply with the same words because I think it is this complementarity of mandate but also the compatibility of our two personalities which has made the ICRC/World Food Programme such an extraordinary cooperation over the last couple of years and I wanted to thank David, but also to thank the Board, for steering us towards this great cooperation.

Let me just say a few things from an ICRC perspective on conflict, pandemic and climate change, and then to access some future challenges.

I think what we see in the conflict environment, and this has been at the core of ICRC's mandate over the last 158 years, it has been a reflection of conflictuality which we are encountering, and warfare and violent conflicts which we are encountering today. Global and regional power competition has continued and exacerbated, but only very few conflicts have been resolved diplomatically and have found political solutions.

Protracted crises continue and crises last for an increasing amount of time. It will be interesting for you also to know that this year marks 40 years of presence of ICRC in Iraq. It marks 60 years of presence in Yemen. 33 years of uninterrupted presence in Afghanistan, and we just commemorated a bleak milestone, ten years of increased presence in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Existing crises are worsening while all conflicts flare up again. We have seen it in the Nagorno-Karabakh, where we see how new conflicts transform. Old conflicts merge with old conflictualities in a society. David has mentioned I am just back from Mozambique. Three years ago it was all about the FRELIMO/RENAMO conflictuality flaring up. Today Northern Mozambique is, again, a very different ball game, a very different dynamic of conflictuality of all kinds of extremist groups getting hold of territory and displacing populations.



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I think what we have noted in our conflict trends over the last couple of years is the urbanization of conflict and with the urbanization humanitarian needs transform. It is with the longevity of conflict and the urbanization of conflict we are increasingly not anymore confronted, just with individuals suffering from the impact of violence.

We are increasingly confronted with broader systemic impacts and disruptions. Education system, social system, food system in your case, water and sanitation system, all these basic systems are suffering and when we look at what drives this enormous expansion of humanitarian needs its system breakdown.

Armed violence is at the present moment the single most important driver of humanitarian needs. Just to remind you displacements have taken place over the last ten years in tens of millions. This is disruptions of individuals, communities, countries and their neighbours.

Let me remind you that just when we look at displacement, 80 percent of those people irregularly displaced at the present moment in the world come from barely more than 20 conflicts, and this is an indication that we are confronted with some hyper-fragility, which disrupt lives and livelihoods of people.

We have seen basic needs spiking; you know it from David. He mentioned it in his introduction this morning when it comes to food, but what he says about food and starvation is true for water, sanitation, health and shelter. We never have seen such an increase of needs, of basic needs, as we have seen over the last ten years.

But we also see new needs emerging. Just now back from the Central African Republic and Mozambique, I was shocked to see and to have been exposed to the victims of sexual and gender-based violence. To all the traumatized children who never knew another reality than conflict.

So, mental health and psycho-social support, addressing sexual violence suddenly becomes an increasing reality of the needs landscape with which we are dealing, and I think we see the protractedness of all those needs coming together. The vulnerable groups, the children, the women, the elderly, the civilians overall. We see the particularly new context, the urban and the broad landscape of needs developing.

We see a big zone of instability going from the Sahara to Namibia to Iraq, but also through the Sahel to the Lake Chad Basin, to the Sudan, to the Central African Republic and the Horn of Africa. We see instability in Asia, in Latin America, in Europe emerging as well, and when we look at the backdrop of what drives some of this instability, we see a fragmentation and the proliferation of conflict actors, which we have rarely seen before.

Today, over a third of non-international armed conflicts involved coalitions of states and/or nonstate armed groups. We see a rising number of non-state armed groups. More armed groups have emerged in the last seven years than in the previous seven decades. That is according to our statistics and our records where we count non-state armed groups in the theatres of operations of ICRC.

The newly emerging armed groups are for the most part decentralized with less top-down control, that they collaborate with one another and sometimes with states in other strategic alliances. In a recent study, we identified 615 armed groups of relevance to our operations around the world and we are in contact with more than 460 of those groups.

What does it mean for humanitarian delivery? What is the key point here is that roughly 60 to 80 million people live outside the reach of state services as modest as these services may be and are in need of humanitarian and protection services by agencies like WFP, other United Nations agencies and the Red Cross and Red Crescent movement.



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While their situations vary, this includes some of the world's most marginalized and excluded and left behind populations. Understanding and engaging with armed groups is critical to negotiate access to populations in need, security for communities and the possibility to deliver minimal services to those people.

That is a little bit my first point I wanted to make on the dynamics of conflict and violence and what is behind it and what drives it.

Two, three words on the pandemic. The global pandemic has been an accelerating force on top of existing fragility. As countries shifted their focus to address COVID-19, other health issues were clearly neglected, from childhood vaccinations to the treatment of chronic diseases to mental health services again.

Let me also remind you that in Yemen we already operate at less than 50 percent of health sector capacities. In the Central African Republic we operate at one-third of health installations, which have been heavily inhibited and impacted by the recent outbreak of violence. In Cabo Delgado, 80 percent of the health facilities are destroyed by tropical storms and some of them by armed violence.

Wash your hands, keep your distance from others is a very academic recipe for those who live in cramped rooms, refugee camps, in provisional shelters and, therefore, we are concerned about the direct and the indirect impact of COVID-19 and that is why we are also concerned about vaccine nationalism. The failure to include vulnerable groups in national plans and the failure to have finance for a humanitarian buffer within COVAX and other important initiatives is something which fills us with big concerns.

And it is not only about the vaccine, it is also about treatment and testing. The socioeconomic impact of the pandemic has hit the most vulnerable communities hardest with those on the edges further pushed to extremely difficult situations.

Again, you know it from food security, David has spoken extensively about it, and some of your national statements have been reflecting this, but I just wanted to make a point. It is not only about food, it is also about the breakdown of water systems, health services and more.

Let me make a strong point here. Beyond the socioeconomic and health impact, we also see COVID-19 as a crisis of protection. As the United Nations has noted, millions of children have dropped out of school, domestic violence has surged, displaced people have found themselves stranded by closed borders, attacks on healthcare continues.

Just to remind you that in May the Security Council will commemorate the five years of resolution 2286, which has illegalized and has spoken out against attacks to healthcare facilities, and we see the spread continuing unabatedly.

We see civilians remaining unprotected, missing, unaccounted for. We see an increase in the illegal trafficking of humans, weapons, drugs to become a new business model as an income-generating activity for many of the fragmented armed groups that I was talking about in my first chapter on the dynamic of violence and conflict.

We see abuses of displaced and detained in vulnerable groups as a series of protection challenges. So, once again, the international community organizations like mine and yours are confronted with always the same dilemmas. Do we put further resources into mitigating the impact of all those strains on people or doing something as I would say colloquially, not only to drain the swamp, but to shoot the crocodiles?

I think this is one of the critical issues we need to ask ourselves. How long can we just add on top of budgets in order to save lives while we inadequately address some of the behavioural challenges outside the norms and principles of the Geneva Convention, the laws of war, the behaviour of individuals, which cause so much pain to so many communities and individuals.



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Let me say something on climate change very briefly as well, just to underline that 12 of the 20 countries considered most vulnerable to climate change are at the same time in conflict, are at the same time top priorities of ICRC's humanitarian concerns in conflict. So, the convergence of climate risk and conflict, it has grave humanitarian consequences already in many of the places.

I mentioned to you Cabo Delgado, where I am coming from, where you see how tropical storms and violence together operate to basically outmanoeuvre the health system overall. Communities are more frequently and urgently citing climate shock as being the core issue of concern to them.

And so one of the big challenges, of course, for a humanitarian organization, how can we take another driver of humanitarian concerns while we need to maintain our neutral and partial and independent role as humanitarians and at the same time address new needs which are emerging and driven by other political drivers and violence, which was at the core of our concern in the past.

Let me just conclude these three points on violence, on the pandemic and climate change with a brief account of what I have encountered in northern Central African Republic a week ago when visiting the hospital in Kaga-Bandoro. I think for me this was kind of an emblematic visit, where visiting a hospital just tells you in one spot at one place where some of the big problems and issues of our international system is.

What you see is people who are treated from war surgery, from malaria, tuberculosis, from COVID-19, you have child malnutrition, you have parents who have difficulties feeding their child. You have broad public health issues, you have competitions over the few people who are capable to vaccinate, to treat, to operate, to offer health services.

The Central African Republic, just to give you an example, we see many countries with similar figures, has just seven health professionals for 100 of the population. We see these weak structures incapable of really adequately responding to some of these convergencies of many factors which come together.

Let me maybe say a few things on access. As David has also mentioned in his introduction as far as I could listen to it, having access and negotiating access and negotiating a neutral and impartial humanitarian space today is really a big challenge, a big headache, but it is also constantly exacerbated by some of the policies. Counterterrorism, legislation, sanctions and de-risking practices of donors lead to increasing difficulties of going to the worst places in the world because we cannot, as humanitarian frontline operators, always be 100 percent accountable for what we are able to do in those hyper-fragile contexts.

We try as well as possible to be accountable to you, but counterterrorism, legislation, sanctions and de-risking practices are big problems. Host government opposition to servicing those 60 or 80 million people living outside of government control is an issue which needs thoughtful approaches, transparency, negotiations, understanding, explanations, and we have our own security, which is a big problem in an increasing number of contexts in which we operate.

We see spiking numbers of attacks on health workers and as long as we are not able to even negotiate security arrangements for ourselves, to negotiate access for ourselves, we are in a big problem and we contribute to the violence, to the downward spiral that I have been talking about.

Let me just highlight how much I appreciate the work that WFP, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Doctors Without Borders, ICRC have done over the last couple of years to professionalize negotiations in frontline contexts in order to negotiate access, we have developed training materials, we have exchanged on common experiences.



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The Centre of Competence on Humanitarian Negotiation in Geneva, which is a co-creation of these five institutions that I have mentioned is a big initiative which responds to some of the complexities and tries to professionalize and to recognize also how complex these negotiations of access into difficult-to-reach areas are.

I think there is nothing more important on access than having fluid and cooperative arrangements between important humanitarian organizations like the two of us. I wanted to highlight how much we help each other, and we complement each other, ICRC and the World Food Programme in so many contexts in which we operate. Sometimes it is us who have an access and World Food Programme has the bulk of the material to be able to distribute. Sometimes you have better access, and we are happy to follow the pathway that World Food Programme has opened.

We have excellent places and examples from Nagorno-Karabakh to South Sudan, to the Central African Republic, to the Sahel, to most of the contexts in which we operate, and I wanted really to praise, to recognize that flexible arrangements in complicated access equations, exchanging on the key obstacles, how to overcome, how to train our people in order to capacitate them to overcome is of critical issues, and I am really delighted to have in the World Food Programme such a great partner.

Let me maybe after all conclude with some critical remark or self-critical remark as well. You have heard me say it already, when I look back at almost nine years at the helm of the ICRC now, I am still puzzled how we have doubled, tripled and quadrupled our humanitarian response to crises, and I have difficulties understanding that we will just do another ten years with the same increases in our budgets and response capacities.

Yes, we need donors' support for the most needy, but we need also to find new pathways in order to generate different forms of cooperation to use technology, digital technologies in order to reach unreachable populations.

We need to embrace new forms of partnerships, I still believe that COVAX is an interesting example of private, public, science, humanitarian organizations coming all together in order to have an impact on a specific situation.

I think we need to rethink this international system. For nine years I am many times in the same dialogue. We complain with donors that we need more money in order to cope with the huge dimensions and the increasing dimensions of problems and at the same time we appeal to states to find political solutions to the problems so that some of the drivers are not having the same effects, the same negative effects on people as they had in the past couple of years.

I think this is the real core of the problem that we are facing and 2021 will most likely be a much more difficult year in order to force us to see how we can expand new financial mechanisms, how we can leverage digital transformation in order to do more accurate and more precise humanitarian assistance. How we can increase the efficiency and the effectiveness of humanitarian work.

How we can define new partnerships in order to really take the best out of each organization in order to have better and more important impact because what we do not see obviously, and here I join David in his introductory statement, we do not see the needs curb, we see the needs spiking and therefore we need to put multiple policies in place in order to counter this trend of the downward spiral which I have alluded to several times now.

The Nobel Peace Prize is for both of our organizations a commitment. Yes, to save lives because lifesaving is a building block to peace, but it is also to find pathways out of the vicious cycles of dependencies in which the most vulnerable are caught today.

I hope you will join the Red Cross movement and others, and we will join you in thinking together how we can build pathways out of dependencies while continuing to respond to the increasing



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and dramatically increasing needs that some of the conflictual climate change, pandemic and other factors have caused to so many societies and states.

I thank you very much and I look forward to the conversation.

