

**23-10-2009 Official Statement**

## Root causes and prevention of internal displacement: the ICRC perspective

Statement by Jakob Kellenberger, President of the ICRC. Special summit on refugees, returnees and IDPs in Africa, Kampala, Uganda, 23 October 2009.

Mr President,  
Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

We come together today to share not only our views and experiences of a problem that concerns all of us present here in one way or another, but also to offer the framework for a solution to that problem.

The adoption of the first ever international treaty for the protection and assistance of IDPs is indeed a significant achievement, and the African Union must be commended for it. Reflecting a long history of cooperation between our respective organisations, the ICRC has been involved in the drafting process from the outset, so it is with great pleasure that I address a few words to this esteemed audience on the day that the process officially comes to fruition.

I have been asked to limit my remarks to root causes and prevention of internal displacement; I will however focus more on the latter than on the former.

It bears repeating that internal displacement poses perhaps one of the most daunting humanitarian challenges of today. The impact on many millions of displaced men, women and children, but also on countless host families and resident communities is hard, if not impossible, to measure. While figures are notoriously hard to come by, no-one would deny that Africa is the hardest hit continent in terms of numbers of IDPs.

The causes of displacement – in Africa, as in other parts of the world – are of course manifold and complex. Quite apart from natural disasters or development-induced displacement, in most cases the root causes of displacement are those that have triggered, or at least contributed to, armed conflict or situations of violence in the first place. Poverty, the effects of climate change, scarcity of resources, political instability, and weak governance and justice systems may all be catalysts for conflict-induced displacement. These same factors often hamper the end of displacement and make the task of rebuilding lives and restoring the livelihoods of people affected by displacement all the more difficult.

Of course many of you here are personally familiar with the causes and the

sometimes overwhelming consequences of internal displacement, coming as you do from countries that have in some cases suffered many years of armed conflict and displacement. President Koroma, with whom I have the honour to share the stage here, knows only too well the devastating impact and long-term consequences of an armed conflict that at one time or another uprooted vast numbers of his country-people, many of them more than once. At the same time, the armed conflicts and situations of violence in neighbouring Liberia, Guinea and also Côte d'Ivoire created an extremely complex situation of displacement across the sub-region, both internally and across borders. Countless people lost their homes and livelihoods, families were separated and communities destroyed. The effects of such complex population movements and the immeasurable suffering that accompany them often persist long after the violence has ended.

One of the main causes of *forced* displacement in armed conflict remains, undoubtedly, violations of international humanitarian law – and this is where the ICRC, thanks to its mandate, has a specific role to play in reminding all parties to a conflict of their legal obligations.

Humanitarian law provisions of particular relevance here include the prohibitions on attacking civilians or civilian property, conducting indiscriminate attacks, starving civilians as a method of warfare, destroying objects indispensable to their survival, and carrying out reprisals against civilians and civilian property. Violations of these rules by parties to a conflict often cause civilians to flee their homes.

The law also expressly prohibits any party to an armed conflict from compelling civilians to leave their homes, and affords IDPs the same protection from the effects of hostilities and the same assistance as the rest of the civilian population. States and any other parties to conflict are obliged to allow the unhindered passage of relief supplies and the provision of aid necessary for the survival of *all* civilians, regardless of whether they have been displaced or not.

It is logical, therefore, that if these laws were better respected, internal displacement could to a large degree be prevented from happening in the first place. Prevention is – without a doubt – better than cure. Yet ensuring enhanced respect for international humanitarian law is a constant challenge.

The new IDP convention contains numerous important provisions of international humanitarian law, which bind both State *and* non-State actors. These include not only the obligation to protect IDPs and to provide them with assistance, but also norms ensuring that forced displacement is prevented and norms that clearly prohibit arbitrary displacement in violation of humanitarian law.

In fact the convention goes further than international humanitarian law treaties in some aspects, for example in the rules it contains on safe and voluntary return, and on access to compensation or other forms of reparation. This is of

course very positive in terms of enhancing the protection of IDPs.

The convention provides a solid framework for enhancing the protection and assistance of IDPs in Africa. The crucial challenge now is of course the same one facing international humanitarian law in general – ensuring that once the convention is signed and ratified by as many States as possible, it is actually implemented and respected. States must now take concrete steps to implement the convention into their own national legislation and regulation systems, and develop plans of action to address issues of displacement.

The ICRC, for its part, stands ready to assist States in the implementation of their international humanitarian law obligations related to displacement. This is one crucial aspect of prevention, as well as of the protection of vulnerable populations once displacement does occur. But it is not the only one.

Preventing displacement from happening in the first place often plays a very prominent role in the ICRC's operational choices and strategies. This is why, from Darfur and the Democratic Republic of Congo to Pakistan and the Philippines, and many more contexts, the ICRC strives to prevent further displacement in part by providing a wide range of services to the population in areas at risk.

The ICRC aims to promote self-reliance among vulnerable communities to help avoid displacement and, where necessary, to improve the community's capacity to host IDPs by strengthening existing coping mechanisms. It does this in various ways, for example by supplying cash-crop and staple-crop seeds and tools, putting existing water systems back into operation and helping provide veterinary services.

Where displacement does occur, the ICRC seeks to address the needs of both the displaced population and of resident communities often hosting IDPs, as well as of returning IDPs. Often, those people who cannot flee, or who decide to stay for other reasons, also have acute humanitarian needs. A person's level of vulnerability cannot – or at least should not – be measured simply on the basis of their status, for example as an IDP.

Mr President,  
Excellencies,

The ICRC has given – and continues to give – emergency assistance to IDPs in camps in exceptional circumstances. For example, the ICRC ran the Gereida camp in Darfur – one of the biggest IDP camps in the world – at a time when security constraints prevented other humanitarian organisations from operating in the area. It also initiated the establishment of the Abu Shok and Kassab camps in Darfur in 2004, when there seemed no choice but to do so. There, the aim from the outset was to avoid long-term dependence and facilitate return as soon as conditions permitted, by providing aid that was adequate but did not risk creating disincentives to return.

In fact in most cases the vast majority of IDPs living in camps usually express an interest in returning home – often to reclaim land or property and resume their normal lives – as long as security conditions are conducive to do so. Assistance should be linked to good exit strategies and facilitation of returns, in such a way as to maximise people's ability to recover, whilst recognising that recovery can only take place if basic needs are met.

This plan ultimately failed. The influx of humanitarian organisations into the Abu Shok and some other Darfur camps by the summer of 2004 resulted in an artificially high level of aid that did not reflect the reality of rural life. Furthermore, the security situation in the IDPs' areas of origin was not conducive to return. These camps became semi-permanent extensions of the towns near to which they were built. At the same time, the ICRC conducted surveys in rural areas that showed an urgent need for food aid in the villages as a result of failed or partial harvests. This prompted the ICRC to shift its focus to rural areas, with the aim of helping residents to stay in their home areas and to avoid an exodus to the camps.

There are other examples of the ICRC taking action in camps at the outset of a new emergency where there is a large-scale influx of IDPs and other humanitarian organisations are not in a position to provide adequate, rapid aid. This was the case in the Kibati camps near the North Kivu town of Goma, in October 2008, where the ICRC provided short-term food rations, non-food items and water supply, and – to take an example from outside Africa – in north western Pakistan, in the wake of heavy fighting which caused massive displacement in largely inaccessible areas. In this latter case, starting from May 2009, the ICRC and the Pakistan Red Crescent Society managed a large IDP camp in Swabi. The ICRC also supported several other camps run by the Red Crescent. At the same time, it provided food and non-food items to IDPs in host families, as well as to the host families themselves, particularly in conflict areas where no other humanitarian organisations were present.

Experience has shown that in many cases the establishment of camps creates new problems that are complex to tackle, and which may in fact compound the vulnerabilities and risks to which IDPs are exposed. While the ICRC will support camps as a measure of last resort, where there is no feasible alternative, it is determined to first exhaust every possible means of preventing this from being necessary.

The challenge of prevention also applies to the recurrence of displacement once IDPs return to their places of origin, settle locally in the community that hosted them, or relocate to yet another place. The conditions for doing so must be safe, voluntary and dignified. This includes recognition by the authorities of the right to property, public services, and sometimes compensation. It may also include encouraging the relevant authorities to clear land contaminated with mines and explosive remnants of war, forego further use of such weapons, and conduct mine-risk education programmes to make people aware

of the dangers. As in the example of North Kivu, the ICRC's response may include offering livelihood-support programmes aimed at boosting the economic security of both returnees and residents, ensuring access to an adequate and safe water supply, and ensuring access to health care. Uganda also provides a good example in this regard. Since 2006, the country's 1.7 million IDPs have gradually been returning to their villages of origin to resume their normal livelihoods. The ICRC has adapted its approach accordingly – from emergency assistance in camps to helping families rebuild their lives with a wide range of support programmes.

Breaking the cycle of displacement by offering durable solutions to end it is of course as challenging as it is important. Again, the experience of Sierra Leone and its neighbours in the sub-region, illustrates the complexity of meeting this challenge. Just knowing how many IDPs there are after a decade of conflict during which there were always large numbers of unregistered IDPs is already difficult, if not impossible. Some may not want to return for various reasons. Defining at what point an area is truly "safe" is often not straightforward either. Another cause for concern may be the lack of shelter and basic services in areas of return, which can prompt IDPs to drift back to urban areas once again. Knowing at what point a conflict is really over, and at what point the emergency phase leads into the development phase is often debated. In very many cases, the gap between relief and recovery remains problematic.

The challenges of effective humanitarian response and peace building are clearly intertwined. Situations of internal displacement cannot be durably resolved until both issues are addressed. One problem feeds the other in a vicious circle. Without long-term commitment to tackle the root causes of conflict there is a risk of repeated patterns of internal displacement and humanitarian crisis, and unless displaced populations are effectively stabilised through adequate protection and assistance, there can be little hope of achieving sustainable peace.

Tackling the problem of internal displacement in all its dimensions requires a huge concerted effort at both the State and international level. The African Union convention for the protection and assistance of IDPs is a very positive step towards addressing the problem of internal displacement on the continent. The ICRC, for its part, stands ready to play its own particular role, and calls upon all concerned States *and* non-State actors to live up to their responsibilities under the convention and ensure its success.

Thank you.