

135th Assembly of the IPU

ICRC Statement

General Debate (5')

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am delighted to have this opportunity to address the Assembly of the Inter-Parliamentary Union and may I start by expressing the gratitude of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) for the productive and long-standing relationship between our two organizations.

Today the ICRC is working in over 80 countries around the world to alleviate suffering. In 2015, the ICRC provided food for 13 million people. Our water, sanitation and construction projects catered for the needs of more than 31 million people. Almost 500 hospitals received ICRC support. And we visited over 900,000 detainees in more than 1,500 places of detention. Our delegates are active every day in Syria, South Sudan, Iraq, Yemen, the Central African Republic, Afghanistan, and many other places where they respond to both acute and protracted crises. For the ICRC to be able to undertake these tasks, adequate funding, respect for the law and a workable legal framework are essential. This is why the opportunity to address your assembly today is both a privilege and a call for action.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The ICRC is convinced that international humanitarian law (IHL) remains a critical tool and the necessary legal framework to protect human life and dignity when armed conflicts arise. Strengthening its respect is in fact the single most important way to improve the lives of civilians, wounded, detainees and all persons who do not participate in the hostilities.

The ratification of IHL treaties and other relevant instruments is a critical first step in making sure those entitled to protection under the law actually benefit from it; and parliamentarians play a vital role in this regard. You also play a crucial role in incorporating these instruments into national law, which is another essential step to ensure their effective implementation.

Legal obligations and prohibitions are of key importance, but are not, however, sufficient to stop violence. Rules must be known, understood, complied with and enforced if they are to be meaningful. In other words knowledge must be translated into appropriate behaviour on the ground, in particular by those who bear weapons. Here again, you as parliamentarians, through your oversight responsibilities, can ensure that the military and security forces are properly trained and knowledgeable about international humanitarian law and all other relevant bodies of law.

The ICRC has developed several tools over the years to assist States meet their responsibilities under international humanitarian law; but today I would like to highlight the updated version of the ICRC-IPU International Humanitarian Law Handbook for Parliamentarians. This handbook is the most recent product of many fruitful years of cooperation and partnership between our two institutions. It is specially designed to familiarize parliamentarians with the general principles of the law of armed conflict and provide step by step guidance on how parliamentarians can effectively contribute to the promotion and compliance with the law.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today's many protracted conflicts are creating new challenges for humanitarian action. For instance, years of fighting often keep countries close to breaking point and have a damaging and long-lasting impact on water and electricity systems, on schools and on hospitals and other support systems that are vital to the lives of ordinary people. In these protracted conflicts, humanitarian actors have to work with two timelines in mind: not only do they have to carry out emergency relief operations, they also have to look several years ahead and allocate resources for more sustainable action that will prevent entire systems from collapsing and will ensure the population's well-being in the long term.

While this is the reality in the field, it is unfortunately not the reality of the current annual humanitarian financing model. Here again, parliamentarians can act. You can help put in place policy, legal and financial frameworks that allow governments to support humanitarian action over many years and better address the real needs and challenges facing people in protracted conflicts.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Your position, your influence and the role that you play, put you in a unique position, not only to make a genuine difference for the many people who are currently suffering the consequences of ongoing armed conflicts, but also to prevent such suffering from happening in the future.

I am therefore hopeful that our newly-published joint handbook on international humanitarian law will give you inspiration and renewed energy to achieve that goal.

Rest assured that the ICRC will continue to support and assist you in your endeavours.

Thank you for your attention.