



Check against delivery

Economic and Social Council – Humanitarian Affairs Segment

Formal panel discussion:

Addressing gender-based violence in humanitarian emergencies

Geneva, 17 July 2006

RESPONSIBILITY FOR PREVENTING SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Statement by Mrs Gabrielle Nanchen

Member of the International Committee of the Red Cross

Madam Chair, your Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Among the many crimes perpetrated against civilians during armed conflict and other situations of violence, one is of particular concern to the ICRC: sexual violence, of which the principal victims are women and girls. For far too long, rape and sexual violence have been under-estimated, considered inevitable, seen as collateral damage in time of war or even as the soldier's well-deserved reward. But the systematic use of rape in Bosnia and Rwanda has made the international community aware of the problem, and humanitarian agencies are now taking this issue into account.

And yet, even though sexual violence is recognized as a problem by the media, by academics, by conference organizers, by humanitarian workers and by donors, there remain numerous obstacles to preventing such crimes, stopping them when they occur, punishing those responsible and helping the victims effectively and appropriately.

Studies of the problem, attempts to understand it and efforts to respond appropriately all suffer from the lack of experience in this area. Only recently have we become aware of the devastating consequences of such actions at an individual, family and community level.

Sexual violence is the only crime for which the reaction of most communities is to stigmatize the victim rather than prosecute the perpetrator. This makes humanitarian action particularly difficult. If they ask for help, the victims of sexual violence run an additional risk, that of being identified by their communities. Furthermore, sexual violence is linked to such questions as honour, virginity and purity. These subjects, along with sexuality, are often among the pillars of a community's values. They are difficult to talk about, or quite simply taboo. That makes it harder for the victims to express themselves, which makes it harder for humanitarian workers to help them.

And there is a paradox: it is difficult to quantify the problem of sexual violence, because the victims don't talk about what has happened to them. The consequences of revealing the truth would be too serious for them, for their families and for their communities. And yet, to identify a problem and react appropriately, the humanitarian system needs such quantitative data. As data on sexual violence remains piecemeal and insufficiently documented, we do not have the means we need to help the victims. Paradoxically, however, we see that the creation of services draws the victims out of the shadows, confirming the importance of such crimes and their consequences.

Given that it is not possible to obtain statistics on sexual violence, any humanitarian agency has to assume that wherever there is armed conflict or mass movements of populations there will be sexual violence, even if it remains invisible, and that these acts will have serious implications for the victims and their communities, in terms both of protection and of health.

Protecting civilians during armed conflicts is one of the ICRC's core tasks. IHL states very clearly that women must be protected against sexual violence, especially sexual violence used systematically as a method of warfare. The ICRC – in accordance with its mandate to protect and assist the victims of armed conflict and internal violence – approaches these crimes from the angle of international humanitarian law, or IHL, despite the fact that sexual violence does often coincide with social and cultural violence. Our organization is well aware that women are particularly exposed to the risk of marginalization, of poverty and to the suffering inherent in armed conflict, and that they will often have been the victims of discrimination even before the conflict started. It is not up to the ICRC to criticize the division of roles between men and women in a given society, nor to try to change it. However, it is often difficult for the ICRC to address only conflict-related sexual violence, as it may be impossible to distinguish sexual violence related to conflict from that which is not.

The ICRC takes a number of approaches to combating breaches of IHL:

- communication programmes appropriate to various target groups;
- the promotion of IHL among arms bearers;
- representations to the parties to a conflict, aimed at ensuring that breaches of IHL cease and that corrective measures are taken;
- the provision of practical assistance, reducing the exposure of vulnerable people to risk.

The ICRC's approach to helping the victims of sexual violence is also multidisciplinary, covering the following five areas:

- the provision of medical treatment within 72 hours of rape occurring;
- psychological care in the form of counselling and support;
- social support for re-integration of victims into their community;
- economic assistance programmes for the victims of sexual violence;
- and protection activities involving confidential representations to the authorities.

Madam Chair, I should like to conclude by pointing out that even though the work of the ICRC does bring relief, it is no substitute for political will on the part of States and arms bearers to ensure compliance with the laws that exist. Our primary role is to remind belligerent States and bearers of arms that this protection is an obligation and not merely a noble aspiration. IHL contains all the provisions necessary to ensure that those who are taking no part in hostilities – especially women – receive the protection and respect they need in time of war. The ICRC therefore calls on all States, armed groups and armed forces to promote the application of IHL, so that this terrible and unnecessary suffering may cease.

Thank you.