

Ms. Beerli (*spoke in French*):

I thank the Senegalese presidency for having invited the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to participate in today's important debate and give its views based on its experience on the ground.

(*spoke in English*) None of us can live without water. We need water

to drink. We need water to grow food. We need water to

cook. And we need water to stay clean. Water is a basic human need and the most fundamental humanitarian requirement. Water is a symbol of life in the poetry of every nation. In the great musical culture of Senegal, the stringed kora of the Griot is made from the same gourd that people use to carry water. The Griot knows that water is for the body what song is for the soul.

In the ICRC's experience, the vital importance of water often makes it a highly contested resource in armed conflicts. Water points become strategic — whether they are rural wells in arid lands or pumping stations in sophisticated cities. In many wars, water systems are also caught up in fighting, becoming damaged, degraded or destroyed. Even when supply exists, accessing water can become extremely dangerous — especially for women and girls who have the responsibility in many societies for water collection. Children can spend hours queuing and collecting water when they should be at school.

Water is directly linked to public health. Polluted drinking water or insufficient water for washing causes people to get ill, which puts additional strain on health facilities and medical personnel already struggling to cope with high demand and limited capacity. Water supply is also clearly linked to forced displacement and migration. When water supply fails, a civilian population has no option but to move. People are forced to leave their homes, leading to large movements of populations.

The provision of a safe, sufficient, regular and clean water supply is a humanitarian priority for the ICRC. In over 80 countries, our water teams work daily to provide water for populations affected by conflict and violence. We work with local authorities, commercial partners, local communities and national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies to ensure our water programmes are sustainable.

Last year, we covered the urgent water needs of 28 million people. The rise in protracted urban warfare in the Middle East and increasing concentrations of internally displaced persons in urban areas in the Lake Chad Basin have caused an exponential increase in the scale and technical complexity of our water operations. Our water operations often see us working across conflict lines, as we repair pumps and pipes that are essential to all sides.

Encouragingly, in several conflicts, opponents will cooperate on water when they will not cooperate on anything else, giving us the access and supply chains we need to keep the water flowing.

Armed conflict has direct and indirect impacts on people's access to water and, over the many years of a protracted conflict, both types of impact have a degrading cumulative impact on water supply. The direct impacts of armed conflict are immediately obvious. Damaging attacks on electricity substations, water-storage installations and piping can render them unusable, cutting off tens of thousands of people in a single strike. Skilled personnel may also be killed, injured or displaced. Indirect impact is less obvious but equally significant. The lack of skilled personnel and shortage of critical supplies means no maintenance for essential infrastructure, which soon deteriorates to the point where water is unsafe or entire populations are cut off.

In protracted armed conflict, this cumulative impact on services is hard to reverse. We have seen this phenomenon recently in Syria, Iraq, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic, where water services are severely reduced and we have resorted to water trucking.

International humanitarian law is clear on the humanitarian significance of water. It places various obligations on parties to conflict to protect water installations. International humanitarian law provides special protection for objects indispensable for the survival of the civilian population, like drinking-water installations and irrigation works. Objects containing dangerous forces, such as dams, are also protected from attack. International humanitarian law also provides important general protection against attacks on civilian objects and attacks that affect civilian populations. Parties to conflict must take precautions in attack and refrain from attacks expected to cause excessive incidental damage and also consider the reverberating effects of their actions on civilian populations.

Despite these clear rules for the protection of essential services like water, the ICRC continues to see populations suffer the consequences of a lack of respect for international humanitarian law. The risk of reverberating effects from damaged water installations is a reason why the ICRC urges parties to conflict to avoid using explosive weapons with wide areas of impact in densely populated areas. Even when aimed at achieving military objectives, the use of such weapons can incidentally damage vital infrastructure located in the vicinity of the targets, severely disrupting the provision of services on which civilians depend for their survival. Parties to conflict have an obligation to ensure that the basic needs of the civilian population are met and that their dignity is protected. Water is essential to a life with dignity, and parties to conflict, Government donors and

humanitarian organizations must work together to support resilient urban services during armed conflicts.

The ICRC welcomes the initiative of the delegation of Senegal to discuss such an important topic here today and we urge members of the Council to take the following measures on water and armed conflict. First, they must respect international humanitarian law and take into account the interdependence of essential services, such as water, health and electricity, and the cumulative impact of protracted armed conflict on essential water supplies for civilian populations. Secondly, they must recognize that dialogue on water needs between warring parties is critical, and they must help to facilitate it. Thirdly, they must prioritize and support effective partnerships between local authorities, service providers and humanitarian organizations to ensure resilient water services. Finally, the Council must ensure that the Council remains seized on the issue.

(spoke in French)

We thank the President for giving the ICRC the opportunity to speak to the Council today on such an important topic and for providing each one of us with water while we are here.