



ICRC

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" A 1325 Call to Action"

Ministerial Side event on Women, Peace and Security

New York, Saturday, 25 September 2010

**Statement by Madame Christine Beerli
Vice-President
International Committee of the Red Cross**

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Ten years ago, amid the optimism and opportunity for fresh beginnings at the start of a new millennium, the UN Security Council's unanimous resolution on women, peace and security was rightly welcomed as groundbreaking.

While it is no secret that ten years later, significant gaps remain in implementing the resolution, this anniversary provides a positive opportunity to reaffirm its spirit and core message: that sustainable peace is only achievable with the full and effective participation of women. We must seize this opportunity not only to refocus international attention on the aims of the resolution, but also to galvanise all concerned parties to turn good intentions into concrete, meaningful action.

The International Committee of the Red Cross, for its part, welcomes the opportunity to restate its firm commitment to translating the spirit of the resolution into a tangible reality, making a difference to the lives of women and girls on the ground.

The protection and assistance of people affected by armed conflict and other situations of violence is at the heart of the ICRC's work around the world. A disproportionate number of these victims are civilian women and girls, not only because of their proximity to the fighting, but often because they are deliberately targeted as a tactic of warfare. Women and girls are particularly exposed to sexual violence and other injury. War may result in their displacement and separation from family members, and may hamper their access to food, safe drinking water and healthcare. It may also leave women as sole breadwinners, with the responsibility of supporting their families on their own.

While international humanitarian law (IHL) adequately addresses the needs of women in wartime, the challenge is, of course, to ensure compliance with the rules by States *and* non-State armed groups. Sexual violence as a weapon of war - to take just one example - is a clear violation of IHL. Reminding parties to a conflict of their obligations under IHL, promoting its implementation at all levels and calling for those who commit abuses to be held accountable are all part of the ICRC's response to the plight of women and girls affected by war.

Beyond this, the ICRC aims to integrate the needs, perspectives and capacities of women and girls in *all* its activities. To do so, it is essential to recognise women's remarkable strength, resilience and ability to find ways to cope in the face of daunting adversity. They play a crucial role in supporting their families and underpinning communities. Consigning them to the category of passive victim is disempowering and counterproductive, excluding them further from humanitarian and peacekeeping efforts.

To give just two examples, in Iraq, where female-headed households are estimated to number as many as one million, the ICRC together with the Iraqi Red Crescent and other local partners initiated small income generating projects to allow such women to achieve economic self-sufficiency. This in turn strengthens societal infrastructure and security.

In the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo, where the appalling situation of sexual violence continues to traumatise entire communities, the ICRC's response integrates medical, psychological and social issues. One particularly innovative response is the establishment of *Maisons d'Ecoute*, or literally, "listening houses". Here, victims of sexual violence receive psychosocial counselling from ICRC-trained counsellors, who are often members of local women's networks; referral to appropriate medical services; and in some cases direct relief assistance. Within the community, counsellors raise awareness of issues

related to sexual violence – including the need to get treatment within 72 hours of being raped – and they may also mediate between family members to reduce the risk of victims being stigmatised or rejected. Since the first *maisons d'ecoute* were established in eastern DRC five years ago, the number of centres and the numbers of women visiting them, especially within 72 hours of being attacked, have risen significantly.

The ICRC firmly believes that directly engaging women – including the victims of sexual violence – in participatory prevention, protection and recovery programmes, is crucial towards the promotion of the role of women in peace building, both during and after conflicts. Women *must* be fully involved in the search for solutions to their problems if those solutions are to have any chance of success.

UN Member States, which have universally ratified the Geneva Conventions and many other instruments of international humanitarian law, have an important role to play. The ICRC calls on them to ensure that provisions of IHL relating to the protection of women and girls – in times of war but also in peace – are incorporated into their national legislation. Such legislation must establish the criminal liability of those who violate IHL and must be properly enforced.

Let us all ensure that this tenth anniversary will be remembered for heralding real, measurable achievements: preventing both government forces and armed groups from abusing women and girls and holding accountable those that do; increasing the number of women involved in peace talks and post-conflict recovery programmes; and ensuring the unfettered participation of women in civil society. Then women would really have something to celebrate.

Thank you.