

Conflict and Climate: A Perfect Storm
Keynote address by Mr. Robert Mardini, ICRC Director-General
DIHAD, March 2022

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, it is a pleasure and a privilege to be here today, to have this opportunity to address all of you on a topic that concerns each and every one of us – no matter where we live in the world. Thanks to Ambassador Putman-Cramer and everyone at DIHAD for the invitation.

Of course, all eyes are currently on Ukraine and the devastating impact of the escalating conflict there. We are witnessing a full-blown international armed conflict, with far-reaching repercussions, and catastrophic humanitarian consequences. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement has significantly boosted its operational response – in Ukraine and the surrounding countries - but the situation is extremely challenging. Working closely with the Ukrainian Red Cross society and other Movement partners, the ICRC has deployed more than 30 additional staff to Ukraine, and we have more than 70 due to deploy soon. This is on top of more than 600 staff we already have working for us in the country.

But humanitarian access and our operational response are being stretched to the limit. The situation in cities like Mariupol is dire. And of course our staff are affected like everyone else. Some describe apocalyptic scenes of death and destruction. People are hiding in freezing basements, with children and pets, all of them terrified. One of our staff described how they were running out of water and food. There was no gas or electricity, no means of heating. The suffering is immense.

In an international armed conflict like this one, the rules of international humanitarian law (IHL) are unambiguous. Parties must protect civilians from military operations and allow safe passage to those fleeing the fighting. IHL also contains rules that protect the natural environment and seek to limit the damage caused to it by armed conflict. This is vital for conflict-affected populations who depend on the environment for food, water and livelihoods. Greater respect for these rules would also help limit environmental degradation and, in turn, reduce the climate risks that conflict-affected communities face.

Which brings me to the main focus of my remarks today. While this is not to detract from the seriousness of what is happening in Ukraine – it is important to stress there are many other grave humanitarian crises that have now fallen below the international radar. Places like Afghanistan, Ethiopia, the Sahel and Yemen. It is vital that we keep the spotlight on these crises too. The same goes for the climate crisis – which we simply cannot afford to ignore. I think it is clear to all of us that climate change has fast become the defining challenge of the 21st century. It is clear that the climate and environmental crises are accelerating and that they already affect everyone, everywhere. It is also clear that people living in countries affected by conflict are among the most vulnerable to the effects of climate change– globally. Of the 25 countries considered the most vulnerable to climate change by the ND-Gain Index, 14 are in a situation of armed conflict, in most cases for many years already. Not that there is a direct link between climate change and conflict. Rather, conflict makes it harder to cope with and adapt to growing climate variability and extremes. The reasons are obvious: conflict-weakened institutions and essential services, poor economies, lack of social cohesion and reversal of development gains. I have seen for myself what climate change means for people affected by conflict. I saw it in Mali, when I visited some months ago. I spoke with people who had been

displaced multiple times – because of violence, but also because of increasingly erratic weather and extreme events such as drought and floods. I spoke with cattle herders who had been forced to move in search of increasingly scarce water and grazing lands. This in turn aggravated tensions with local communities that erupted into violence and sparked further displacement.

I saw it in South Sudan last year, where millions of people were affected by conflict and recurrent natural disasters on an epic scale. Widespread flooding had caused further displacement and contributed to severe food shortages.

And I saw it just last month in Afghanistan. There, economic paralysis, crumbling essential services and the pandemic - on top of more than four decades of conflict - have left the country on the brink of total collapse. As if things couldn't get any worse, successive droughts have disrupted harvests and caused yet more misery. I was shocked by the extent of malnutrition, not just among young children but among adults too.

The fact of being displaced – combined with chronic instability – means it is so much harder for people to adapt to climate change. It is much harder for them to modify their farming methods, or to change livelihoods altogether.

The point is, we are seeing these patterns not just in the driest, hottest parts of Africa - like the Sahel. We are seeing them far beyond – in places like Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia and Yemen; places where many years of fighting and insecurity have increased fragility and weakened the capacity of people and institutions to cope with shocks.

So, what can be done? Of course, we need concerted global efforts to limit climate change and avoid the worst effects for people and their environment. But at the same time, we urgently need to find ways to help people and communities adapt. For example, in the Sahel, we are helping farmers and herders cope by rehabilitating irrigation schemes, stabilising advancing dunes, and supporting the storage and production of animal feed. In Iraq, we are working to reduce water loss by rehabilitating pumping and treatment stations, piped network and irrigation systems. In Rakhine State, Myanmar, we are improving rainwater catchment and storage, better conserving water and reducing the risk of waterborne diseases. Various other initiatives are underway. But much remains to be done.

We need first to strengthen our understanding of short and longer-term climate and environmental risks. And we need to be realistic about our capacity to develop appropriate programmes to address these risks. To this end, the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre is a valuable source of support and expertise. Given the huge scale of the challenge, we also need to actively mobilise others to come together to provide adequate responses. Strong global partnerships and cooperation are key – hence the relevance of SDG17 in this domain. One initiative to this end is the Climate and Environment Charter for humanitarian organisations, which we developed in a widely consultative process together with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent societies. To date, more than 220 humanitarian organisations have signed the Charter. Three States – Switzerland, USA and Norway – have signed as supporters. All signatories commit to stepping up their response to growing humanitarian needs, helping people adapt to the impacts of crises and strengthening their resilience to shocks. They also commit to reducing their own footprint.

Crucially, we need to mobilise those who are best placed to ensure that climate action and finance reach communities affected by conflict. This includes national and local authorities, international financial institutions and the private sector. We are already

exploring joint solutions with institutions like the World Bank and a wide range of partners, including UNHCR.

It is critical too that we put our own house in order. As part of the Charter I just mentioned, the ICRC has committed to factor climate risks into all of our programmes by 2025. We have also set an ambitious target to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions by 50 per cent by 2030.

In order to enable and support this transformation, in January we launched the ICRC Climate & Environment Transition Fund. This is a key element of our climate and environment strategy, aiming to mobilise funds in innovative ways and generate measurable savings in terms of money and CO₂. The first phase – estimated to cost CHF 15.3 million – will focus on transforming our highest fuel consuming sites in 7 countries to solar power. The multi-year fund will grow and evolve over time, to support long-term climate and environment initiatives in our operations worldwide. Looking ahead to COP27, our basic message to world leaders remains the same as it was at COP26. Without decisive support from the international community, what is happening now in conflict and climate-affected countries like Mali, Afghanistan and Yemen will only get worse. And similar crises will multiply in many other places. This means closing the action and funding gap between them and middle-income countries. It means committing more funding to adaptation efforts, which still lags far behind funding for mitigation efforts. There is still a huge gap between words and action in this regard. While many states are committed in principle to reach the most vulnerable, in practice they are often left behind.

The task at hand is urgent – but it can be done. The devastating reality of climate change brings with an overwhelming imperative for positive change – for increased global solidarity, for working together to look after the most vulnerable people in society, and for protecting our planet. Simply put, there is no alternative.