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War in cities: a solemn appeal from the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

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Around the world, civilians in cities at war face immense risks. Urban warfare devastates lives and livelihoods, as people are killed and injured, critical infrastructure such as hospitals and water systems are damaged or destroyed, and entire communities are forced to flee. Disruptions to essential services amplifies the suffering of civilians and poses significant humanitarian challenges. As urbanization grows, the impact of conflicts in cities demands

urgent and coordinated action to reduce harm and uphold the protections afforded under international humanitarian law (IHL).

At the 34th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in October 2024, this pressing issue was raised through the adoption of a Solemn Appeal on War in Cities. The resolution, adopted by consensus, reflects a shared recognition of the human cost of urban warfare and a commitment to improving the protection of civilians. To mark this moment, the resolution was read aloud during the conference, underscoring its importance and the collective responsibility it calls for. Today, we share both the transcript and video of the reading as a reminder of the need for action to safeguard human lives and preserve dignity in urban conflict settings.

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When wars are fought in cities, we see appallingly high numbers of civilians wounded and killed. Over and over again, we see hospitals destroyed, medical systems in crisis, medical personnel threatened and injured, and sick patients succumbing to preventable deaths. Even those fortunate enough to survive carry physical and mental scars long after the fighting abates.

When front lines move into cities, we see streets, homes, cultural property and buildings turned into battlegrounds and civilians trapped in besieged areas. Despite their resilience and ingenuity, we see the lives of civilians in urban areas become ever more precarious. Every trip to the market, to work or to school can mean a loved one is hit by a stray bullet, shrapnel or an explosive blast. We see those forced to flee lose contact with their families, sometimes never to meet again.

When explosive weapons are used in cities, we often see entire neighbourhoods turned into rubble, their residents buried underneath. Infrastructure critical for the survival of the civilian population is destroyed and damaged without adequate means for repair. We see residents run out of drinking water and food, electricity provision disrupted and communication networks break down. Civilian life grinds to a halt and takes years, sometimes decades, to rebuild.

The volunteers and staff of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement try to alleviate human suffering and protect lives whenever armed conflict breaks out, often in dangerous situations. We experience the humanitarian impacts of urban warfare every day and are all too often prevented from providing assistance. **We have seen enough.**

Our Movement was founded to bring assistance without discrimination to the wounded on the battlefield. Decades of efforts to limit the suffering of war victims culminated 75 years ago in the adoption of the Geneva Conventions and, subsequently, of their Additional Protocols.

However, these historic achievements stand in stark contrast to the scale of devastation and suffering of recent conflicts fought in cities, where an estimated 70% of the global population will live by 2050. Current trends in urban conflicts present profound implications for the protection of civilians, for humanitarian assistance, for the fabric of international humanitarian law (IHL) and for future generations.

We, therefore, solemnly appeal to all States party to the Geneva Conventions to uphold their obligation to respect and to ensure respect for IHL in all circumstances.

We further solemnly appeal to all States, as well as to non-State armed group parties to armed conflict, to:

- ensure, where fighting in urban areas cannot be avoided, that the protection of civilians and civilian objects is identified as a strategic priority in military operations and implemented, including through full and rigorous compliance with IHL and effective civilian harm mitigation policies and practices;
- for all States, endorse the 2022 Political Declaration on Strengthening the Protection of Civilians from the Humanitarian Consequences arising from the Use of Explosive Weapons in Populated Areas (Political Declaration), and, for all States and non-State armed group parties to armed conflict, adhere to and faithfully implement its commitments;
- adopt and implement policies to avoid using explosive weapons with a wide impact area in populated areas owing to the significant likelihood of indiscriminate effects, including when implementing the Political Declaration's commitment to restrict or refrain as appropriate from the use of all explosive weapons in populated areas;
- improve the capacity of armed forces to understand the location and interconnected nature of critical infrastructure that provides essential services for civilian populations, and avoid damage to such infrastructure;
- take all feasible precautions to protect the civilian population and civilian objects in attack and against the effects of attacks, uphold the requirement for combatants to distinguish themselves from the civilian population and comply with the prohibition on the use of human shields;
- respect and protect medical personnel, facilities and transport, as well as Red Cross and Red Crescent personnel, volunteers and assets, and uphold the protective value of the emblems;
- facilitate safe, rapid and unimpeded access to areas of urban conflict for impartial humanitarian organizations, civil defence, essential services providers and essential supplies;
- ensure that all armed forces are provided with adequate training and operational guidance that supports them to comply with IHL and protect civilian populations when fighting in urban areas;

- monitor compliance with IHL and ensure accountability for violations of IHL, including through prompt, independent and effective investigations and prosecutions as appropriate;
- review and improve the capacities of armed forces to understand the humanitarian impacts of their military operations, including through disaggregated data collection and analysis and seeking the views of women, men, girls and boys affected by urban warfare, in order to inform decision-making, assess compliance with IHL and respond to the needs of the civilian population.

Every one of us may, one day, have family hiding in a basement, a neighbour caught in crossfire or a friend unable to receive critical medical treatment. It is already a reality for millions of people, and together we can make a difference. Let us be guided by our common humanity and take urgent and effective action to alleviate the plight of civilians affected by urban conflicts.

See also:

- Ellen Policinski, **The Geneva Conventions at 75: what was the role of the International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in securing protection for civilians?**, October 22, 2024
- Helen Durham, Kosuke Onishi, **'Act today, shape tomorrow': the 33rd International Conference**, December 10, 2019

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