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Senate Foreign Relations Committee Testimony

“Flashing Red: The State of Global Humanitarian Affairs”

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Chairman Corker, Ranking Member Cardin, distinguished Committee members, thank you for the opportunity to testify today on what is fast becoming one of the most critical humanitarian issues to face mankind since the end of the Second World War. As famine looms over several countries in Africa and the Middle East – with many millions of people suffering severe food insecurity and increasing numbers facing starvation – we are at the brink of a humanitarian mega-crisis unprecedented in recent history. While the situations in the four countries primarily affected – South Sudan, Somalia, Nigeria and Yemen – are all distinct, the overall scale of acute humanitarian needs in different places at the same time is immense.

My statement today will focus on the urgent need for accelerated efforts to avert such a catastrophe, in consideration of the scope of the problem, the ICRC’s mandate and operational response on the ground, and the vital role of the US in its support to our work and to humanitarian action more broadly. Sustained and robust US funding for humanitarian action – which not only saves lives but also helps shorten crises, facilitates eventual reconstruction and reconciliation, and promotes stability – is needed now more than ever.

Our main message is clear: immediate, decisive action is needed to prevent vast numbers of people starving to death. We also need to address the root causes of this desperate situation. If we act now, the worst-case scenario can still be avoided, particularly in Somalia and Yemen. The ICRC has a long-standing presence on the ground in all four affected countries: as one of very few international humanitarian actors who are effective front-line responders, we are often able to reach vulnerable people in areas inaccessible to others. We need your support, and we need it now.

**Scope of the humanitarian problem**

The humanitarian crises in all of these contexts are, in differing degrees, man-made and all are to a large extent preventable.

The main cause of hunger – and of wider humanitarian need – in all four countries is protracted (and intractable) armed conflict. All are characterised by asymmetric warring parties, particularly fragmented and multiplying non-state armed groups; by a widespread lack of respect for even the most fundamental rules of international humanitarian law; and by a lack of any viable political solution to end them. In addition, all of these armed conflicts have regional repercussions, which in the case of northern Nigeria are being felt across the entire Lake Chad region.

In South Sudan, more than three years of brutal armed conflict has resulted in economic collapse, with large-scale displacement, loss of agriculture and livestock, massive inflation, rising food prices, widespread hunger, and – in areas where specific criteria have been fulfilled – famine. One in three households is estimated to be in urgent need of food. The approximately 3.4 million people who have been forced to flee their homes are among the most vulnerable, fearing for their lives and often hiding in remote swampy areas.

In Somalia, northern Nigeria and Yemen, harsh climate conditions and environmental problems, including cyclical drought, are major factors in the current crises, but not decisive ones. Combined with chronic insecurity and fighting (more than a quarter of a century in the case of Somalia), and extremely constrained humanitarian access, the consequences are however catastrophic.

In Somalia, where memories are still raw of the famine that killed more than a quarter of a million people just six years ago, the adverse effects of drought are being felt much more widely than in 2011. An estimated 6.2 million people, over half the country's population, are now facing acute food insecurity across the country and are in need of urgent assistance. With famine looming once again, there is a growing concern that should the aid response fail to keep pace, the situation will get much worse.

People living in conflict-affected areas of north-eastern Nigeria are likewise experiencing desperate food shortages, with an estimated 1.4 million internally displaced people in Borno state (one of the hardest-hit parts of the country) as well as resident communities in difficult-to-reach areas living a particularly precarious existence. Some 300,000 children in Borno state alone are expected to suffer from severe acute malnutrition over the next twelve months. In some remote areas, general acute malnutrition rates among children, pregnant women and lactating mothers are reported to be as high as 70 per cent.

And in Yemen, decades of recurrent upheaval, drought and chronic impoverishment preceded the current calamitous situation – where two years of intensifying conflict have caused spiralling humanitarian needs including alarming levels of acute malnutrition, especially among children. With a mere 45 per cent of health structures functioning and less than 30 per cent of vital medicines and medical supplies entering the country, hospitals with which the ICRC works have reported a 150 per cent increase in child malnutrition cases. Fighting in or near ports, such as Hodeida, has seriously hampered the import of vital humanitarian supplies of food, fuel and medicine needed to address critical needs and stave off famine.

### **ICRC mandate and response**

While famine poses common problems in the four contexts, each crisis has its own dynamics and the humanitarian response must be adapted accordingly.

The ICRC, broadly, works with Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies worldwide to deliver relief and protect people from armed conflict and violence. We work even in the most constrained and complex situations of armed conflict, where the authorities are not willing or able to protect or assist people in need, and where a direct and radically principled response is invaluable. This requires an approach that demonstrates the value and practical application of the fundamental principles of impartiality, neutrality and independence in a number of ways. It must be needs-based, have close physical proximity to the beneficiaries, and entail engagement with *all* stakeholders, including state and non-state actors – thereby gaining the widest possible acceptance and respect, and through this, the widest possible humanitarian access to people in need of protection and assistance.

Better protecting conflict-affected people – through law, policy and operations – is at the heart of our overall strategy. To this end, we promote compliance with international humanitarian law at all levels, and engage in confidential dialogue with state and non-state actors with the aim of preventing violations from occurring in the first place. We have worked with states, including the US government, for over a century to develop and apply the law of armed conflict – rules that protect soldiers, civilians, detainees, and the wounded and sick in war.

At the same time, the ICRC works to address victims' wide-ranging needs – be they food, water, shelter, other essential items or medical care; tracing missing family members and re-establishing links between them; or ensuring that people in detention are well-treated.

While humanitarian action is of course vital to save lives and meet short-term needs, the long-term nature of many of today's wars means it is also increasingly necessary to sustain basic services and infrastructure in fragile environments, and at the same time boost livelihoods and build resilience against shocks. In places at risk of drought and ultimately famine, this may include improving access to clean water, strengthening nutritional programmes as well as hygiene awareness, protecting vital livestock against diseases and providing various forms of economic support.

The scope and magnitude of these humanitarian needs, and the reality of today's broad humanitarian "ecosystem" comprising diverse actors working on local, national and international level, with varying degrees of organization, approaches and goals, makes effective coordination and constructive engagement with diverse stakeholders all the more imperative. For the ICRC, this means strong and effective partnerships primarily with Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, but also engaging closely with States and non-State actors, UN agencies, regional or faith-based organizations and many others.

The ICRC, together with Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, has been on the ground for many years in the four countries now threatened with famine. Just a few brief examples of our 2016-17 activities are as follows:

- Provided food to nearly 750,000 people in **South Sudan**. The ICRC will continue food assistance in 2017, working alongside the South Sudan Red Cross Society, while also expanding programs that provide seeds and tools to communities, helping them feed themselves. In 2017, ICRC surgical teams are continuing to provide urgent medical care and build up local medical capacities in South Sudan.
- Working closely with the Somali Red Crescent Society, provided nearly 750,000 people in **Somalia** with urgent food assistance, clean water, and medical attention. In 2017, the ICRC is rapidly scaling up these efforts to mitigate the risk of famine.
- Provided food to more than 1.2 million people in conflict-affected areas of **Nigeria**, and agricultural inputs such as seeds and fertilizer to more than 280,000 returnees to enable them to start farming again. The ICRC also provided hundreds of thousands of people with medical assistance, access to water and improved sanitation and hygiene. In 2017, the ICRC is stepping up efforts to meet urgent food and other needs including in the most difficult-to-reach areas, and supporting the emergency response work of the Nigerian Red Cross Society.
- Supplied 20 medical centers in **Yemen** with surgical items and critical medication, enabling local hospitals to treat more than 250,000 people injured by the conflict or who were in need of medical attention, and supporting the critical work of the Yemeni Red Crescent Society. The ICRC also provided food and other items, like tarps and water cans, to nearly 750,000 people in Yemen. In view of the threat of famine, the ICRC is expanding its operations in 2017, focusing on supporting hospitals and providing food to hungry people.

The ICRC has already begun scaling up its work in all four countries. In total, we will be spending at least 400 million CHF (about 400 million USD) this year. But in view of the overwhelming needs, this is still just a drop in the ocean.

## **What needs to be done**

### **Financial support: short-term needs and long-term resilience**

First and foremost, there is a need for donor generosity and more humanitarian aid, to facilitate humanitarian action to save lives and meet short-term needs, but also to enable investment in programmes that help build the resilience and self-sufficiency of affected communities. This could be providing training and grants to women heads of households to start income-generating activities, or training staff of the national Red Cross or Red Crescent society in first aid and emergency preparedness, to give just two examples.

Both the quantity and quality of US support to the ICRC over many years has been outstanding, and vital for us to be able to do our work. The US government has been the ICRC's biggest single donor since 1980, covering between 20 per cent and 28 per cent of our annual expenditures. This reflects strong, bipartisan support for the ICRC and its humanitarian action. In 2016, the US State Department provided the ICRC with 417 million USD, representing 24 per cent of the ICRC's global budget. Congress provides critical support through the Migration and Refugee Assistance account in the State/Foreign Operations appropriations bill. This generosity also reflects a level of trust and appreciation that the ICRC provides good value for money, based on the relevance, effectiveness and efficiency of our humanitarian work.

However, it is not just the size of the contribution that counts. The US government has also provided the ICRC with a significant amount of flexible funding – money not earmarked for specific crises. Flexible funding enables the ICRC to respond quickly and early to emergencies with vast needs but less visibility. Without it, the ICRC would be unable to fulfill its international mandate of protecting and assisting the victims of *all* armed conflicts – not just the ones which attract media attention or are high on the political agendas of States.

The ICRC response to the crisis in Nigeria is one example. The ICRC has been providing food, medical and other live saving assistance to people affected by conflict in Nigeria for eight years. Few other agencies were working in north-eastern Nigeria until 2016, when the conflict finally gained more global media attention, and thus humanitarian funding. Without the quantity and quality of US financial support, the ICRC may not have had a significant presence in northern Nigeria until last year, potentially resulting in millions more displaced or facing starvation.

We would like to take this opportunity to reiterate our deep gratitude to the US government, including Members of Congress, for this historic financial support that helps save countless lives and stabilize conflict areas. Republican and Democratic administrations alike have robustly funded the ICRC's operations and humanitarian action more broadly. We respectfully ask for that support to continue.

At the same time, the scale and number of humanitarian crises requires that we seek out new donors, and ask other governments that could contribute more to do so. The US can help the ICRC develop a truly global support base by urging governments to follow its example of providing predictable, quality financial support to the ICRC.

We are also seeking more collaborative and innovative solutions with increasingly diverse stakeholders, including the corporate sector and research and development institutions. Beyond simple pecuniary support, the corporate sector's wealth of ideas, expertise and resources – be it in the domain of communication technologies, health care and a wide range of others – has become invaluable in helping us to better deliver on our mandate, to reach people in need of protection and assistance, and to provide a relevant and effective response to their needs.

### **Compliance with international humanitarian law**

Not only is there a need for more humanitarian aid, but also a need to ensure that it actually reaches the people who need it most. This means ensuring better humanitarian access and proximity to the people directly affected, on both sides of frontlines. And this, in turn, means that both military forces and armed groups must meet their legal obligations to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian relief supplies to all those who need it.

The basic message is simple: better respect for the rules of international humanitarian law and for the principle of humanity is the single best way to reduce suffering in war. Civilians and civilian objects must not be targeted. Wounded and sick people's right to health care during armed conflict must be respected and protected, and attacks on health personnel and facilities must stop. The basic services that preserve life – and prevent starvation – need to be protected. Blockades need to be lifted – in the name of humanity.

Strengthening compliance with humanitarian law and preventing violations is therefore a fundamental prerequisite to achieving better protection for people affected by armed conflict. For the ICRC, this entails engaging with all parties to conflict – no matter how challenging this may be – in an effort to gain acceptance and access to people in need. It also entails engaging with other stakeholders – including States – who can positively influence the behaviour of parties to conflict.

The relationship between the ICRC and the US is strong in this regard too, with the two enjoying a constructive and confidential dialogue on the latter's combat operations and detention activities around the world. The US has a long tradition of promoting the law of armed conflict – a tradition it can continue by ensuring that its armed forces respect this law and influencing security partners to do the same. Through training and sharing of best practices, the US can also help partner forces protect civilians and detainees in war.

### **Conclusion**

Mr Chairman, Ranking Member Cardin, the onus is of course on those who wage war and those who support them to prevent these humanitarian crises from becoming even bigger tragedies, and ultimately to show the political will required to end the conflicts.

Yet as long as political solutions remain elusive, it is incumbent on humanitarian organisations such as the ICRC to alleviate the suffering as best we can, and try to prevent existing humanitarian crises becoming uncontrollable catastrophes. For that we need funding and humanitarian access. The US can – and does – play a vital role in supporting us in both these domains.

Responding only when people are already dying of hunger will inevitably be too little, too late. The cost of delay – in terms of finance but moreover in terms of lives lost – would be unconscionable.

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