

ICRC president tells Gaza forum: civilians must be protected, hostages must be released unharmed

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A speech given by Mirjana Spoljaric, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, at the international humanitarian conference for the people of Gaza held in Paris.

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The suffering we have seen unfold in Gaza and Israel is intolerable: the tragic loss of many people and of so many children. The destruction of people's homes. The deep and recurrent traumas. The hostages still held captive and their families in anguish.

It is intolerable to think this catastrophic humanitarian situation has lasted for a month; it is unacceptable that it lasts any longer.

International humanitarian law is the most complete and practical tool at our disposal to ensure the protection of civilians and to pave the way for de-escalation.

I urge the international community to ensure its full implementation.

Mr President, ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

The immediate imperative is to save lives and preserve humanity. Rapid and sustained humanitarian access and supplies are desperately needed.

Critical services like health care, water, electricity and communications must be immediately restored in Gaza as a life-saving priority.

In Gaza, the ICRC has more than 100 staff who remain working amid the violence. We have pre-positioned life-saving supplies, and recently through the Rafah crossing, we brought in medical supplies and a new team including surgical and weapon contamination experts.

But stocks are running out, and our surgeons now lack anaesthesia and even gauze to treat burn victims.

We are ready to rapidly scale up, given the vast needs, but we need to be able to regularly bring in large volumes of stocks and have the necessary access and safety guarantees.

The ICRC is working to support communities in Gaza, the West Bank, and Israel, including by supporting the essential emergency services provided by our partners, the Palestine Red Crescent Society (PRCS), Magen David Adom in Israel (MDA), and other members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement – notably the Egyptian Red Crescent Society.

Humanitarian workers in Gaza and Israel have showed incredible courage and dedication.

Tragically, as we have heard, medics from the MDA and PRCS, as well as the UN and other humanitarians, have been killed while working to help others. I pay tribute to them and call for the urgent protection of all civilians, including humanitarian and medical personnel and hospitals, in line with international humanitarian law.

The role of a neutral intermediary has proven valuable to meet humanitarian needs. Through our dialogue with the parties, the ICRC has offered practical assistance at critical moments.

On Monday, we accompanied ambulances transporting patients in need of urgent medical care from Al Shifa Hospital in Gaza City to the Rafah border. As a trusted neutral actor, the ICRC also facilitated the two hostage release operations. We

continue to call for the immediate release of hostages, and remain committed to facilitating any further release and to visiting the hostages.

But:

Humanitarian aid must not become a fig leaf for failing to protect civilian lives.

The primary responsibility to protect victims of war rests on the parties to the conflict.

These protections must be extended to all civilians including those who remain in Gaza city. The north is unlikely to be completely emptied of its population and not all of its buildings can be considered military targets. It is urgent to start preparing for the return to the north for the hundreds of thousands of families displaced. Respecting IHL now will have a substantial and positive impact.

In the West Bank, the deadly violence against civilians continues to escalate : these people cannot be forgotten and their needs and protection must be addressed.

Without immediate restraint on both sides, we are heading for an even deeper humanitarian disaster, and perpetuating cycles of violence.

We cannot accept absolute hostility to the point of dehumanization of the other side.

With each passing day the possibility of finding a way back to a dialogue and a political solution dwindles.

We must try not only to reduce human suffering, but also to preserve a minimal space in which to agree on something that is not achieved through military means, but through political discussions.

I urge States to use their influence to ensure IHL is fully respected and implemented.

The Geneva Conventions are practical:

- Killing civilians and ill-treatment are prohibited.
- The wounded and sick must be cared for, protected and respected.
- People detained must be treated humanely and with dignity.
- Hostage-taking is prohibited and hostages should be immediately released unharmed.
- Civilian infrastructure that people depend on to live – including electricity and water networks – must be spared.
- Irrespective of any military siege, the parties must ensure that civilians have access to basic necessities, including medical care.

We are confronted with a catastrophic moral failing – one that the world must not tolerate.

I urge you to take concrete political steps to ensure a sustained humanitarian space, protect the special role of neutral actors such as the ICRC, provide adequate funding and to urge respect for the practical implementation of the laws of war.

For more information:

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