

OSCE summit: "an opportunity to share the ICRC's humanitarian concerns with States"

On the eve of an OSCE summit set to take place in Astana on 1-2 December 2010, to which the ICRC has been invited, Pascale Meige Wagner, ICRC head of operations for Eastern Europe and Central Asia, discusses the humanitarian challenges in the region.

What are the main humanitarian issues in the Caucasus and in Central Asia?

There are two kinds of issues. On one hand, we deal with the legacy of past conflicts and, on the other, with new situations of armed conflict and other violence.

People are still severely affected by long-lasting humanitarian problems arising from past conflicts. Hundreds of thousands of people are internally displaced, tens of thousands of people have gone missing, leaving their families desperately waiting for news, and many villages have to deal with a legacy of mines or other remnants of war. Together with our partner National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, we deal with these situations by providing economic-security services, psycho-social support, reconstruction of shelter and infrastructure, water and sanitation, training for forensic experts, and other services.

Past conflicts, in addition to all the suffering they cause, are mostly unresolved and still feed tensions between the parties. That is why our role as a neutral intermediary is so critical. For example, we organize family visits to Georgians and South Ossetians detained on both sides as a result of the 2008 conflict. In connection with the Nagorny Karabakh conflict, we visit prisoners of war and civilian internees. And recently we were again involved in the transfer of detainees and of mortal remains between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Missing persons cases are another important area in which the ICRC serves as a neutral intermediary. We bring together parties to conflict to find out, on behalf of the families, what happened to those who went missing. We are currently hosting a tripartite commission on Georgian, Ossetian and Russian persons missing since the 2008 conflict.

Our humanitarian visits to people detained in connection with security issues or conflicts are conducted primarily to improve conditions of detention and treatment, but they also help to mitigate tensions.

What are the challenges for the ICRC in addressing the consequences of today's conflicts?

Over the past two years, we have seen a new type of situation: volatile, difficult to predict, with sudden outbursts of violence. The 2008 conflict in Georgia and the recent situation in Kyrgyzstan are cases in point, which have demonstrated the importance of being able to respond quickly to the large-scale needs of those affected. This involves strengthening the emergency preparedness of the region's National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Health needs are often the most urgent. Our response consists in supplying medical items and in providing training in first aid and war surgery.

After last summer's clashes in Tajikistan, we reinforced our presence in the country and are about to re-open our office in the Rasht valley, where we were active during the civil war that took place in the second half of the 1990s.

How do you see the challenges for the future?

Since the early 1990s, we have been promoting compliance with international humanitarian law in an effort to minimize the consequences, in humanitarian terms, of armed conflict. More recently, we have also been promoting other bodies of law pertaining to other situations of violence which, currently, occur more frequently than traditional armed conflict, and have more severe effects.

We have been focusing on national implementation of international rules, because what is crucial is how legal systems and armed and security forces deal with the various crises. We support the authorities in their efforts to implement the rules, and encourage them to share their experience at regional meetings involving States, armed and security forces and academics. Last year, we held a seminar on current challenges to humanitarian rules in Astana, Kazakhstan, and more recently, a seminar on the implementation of international humanitarian law in Minsk, Belarus.

What is the objective of your participation in the OSCE summit?

We want to share our humanitarian concerns with the States in the region. We have had a major presence in this part of the world since the early 1990s, and our knowledge of the issues at stake is both long-standing and deep. Let me emphasize, however, that it is the States that bear primary responsibility for preventing humanitarian emergencies from happening, and for responding to them should they nevertheless occur. Finding solutions to issues of urgent humanitarian concern would also serve to promote both political stability and reconciliation.

See also: interview on the ICRC's activities in behalf of missing persons in Georgia
<http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/interview/georgia-interview-120510.htm>

and interview on the ICRC's activities in Kyrgyzstan

<http://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/interview/kyrgyzstan-interview-080910.htm>