DO THE PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICE OF RED CROSS NEUTRALITY MEET THE NECESSITIES OF TODAY’S HUMANITARIAN ACTION?

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The year 2009 marked the 150th anniversary of the battle of Solferino which was the direct cause of the launch of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. The young Swiss businessman Henri Dunant changed the world with his revolutionary initiative to help all victims of conflict, regardless of which side of the conflict they fought for. Dunant’s idea was the foundation of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, as well as a set of values that spread around the world.

The principle of neutrality, one of the core principles of the Red Cross, is derived from these values. The principle of neutrality is not a goal in itself, but a tool which is used to achieve our overarching goal of humanitarianism.

For the Red Cross, neutrality means that we do not take sides in a conflict, but help the victims of all sides. The Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement does not consider the legality of an armed conflict, or who is on the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ side of a conflict. We relate solemnly to the fact that there is an actual armed conflict and that there are innocent victims that need assistance. We help people based on need, and do not take into account their political, racial, religious or ideological beliefs.

The concept of neutrality has been under pressure in recent years. So, too, has respect for the idea. This is amplified by today’s and tomorrow’s conflicts, which are characterized by terrorist attacks, followed by public condemnation, and the blurring of lines between actors. This reality makes it even more difficult not to take sides and still be considered relevant.

* Based on the remarks of Sven Mollekleiv, President of the Norwegian Red Cross, during a seminar on Neutrality, held in Oslo 8 May 2009, to mark the annual celebration of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Day.
The ongoing conflict in Afghanistan is a good example of how neutrality has been put under pressure due to the lines between military, civil and humanitarian actors and mandates being blurred. In my view, these actors have very different mandates and one must hold to these different mandates to ensure respect for neutral and independent humanitarian action.

The international presence in Afghanistan can be summed up in two projects: one political, and one humanitarian. Unfortunately the lines between these two projects are no longer clear. This has, among other things, been caused by the fact that all actors are trying to win the hearts and minds of the people.

In my view, however, there is a big difference between, on the one hand, winning the hearts and minds of the people of Afghanistan in order to get access to provide humanitarian help, and, on the other hand, using humanitarian help to win the hearts and minds of people.

From my perspective, as President of one of the world’s 186 National Red Cross/Red Crescent Societies, this cannot be stated clearly enough: The Red Cross is not only expected to give impartial, neutral humanitarian aid, we are also obliged to safeguard the humanitarian space that gives us the access to help and the confidence of the beneficiaries.

But gaining access is not always easy, especially in situations where governments are determined to keep from the public information about a specific situation. During the end of April and beginning of May 2009, as the Sri Lankan civil war raged towards its end, the Norwegian media reported that a representative from the government of Sri Lanka accused the Red Cross of giving false evidence. According to Red Cross data, 70 % of the civilians evacuated from the area in question had wounds or an illness directly related to the conflict. The ICRC went public with that information. The immediate response from the government was to claim that this information was based on lies, and that these sorts of accusations are the reason why they deny international organisations access to certain areas in the north of the country. In Sri Lanka thousands of civilians were trapped in the so called no-fire zone. An armed attack in this zone, involving heavy artillery, would always imply a large number of civilian casualties and would, thus, be in violation of international humanitarian law. Stating such violations of IHL is not a breach of our neutrality, but acting in accordance with our mandate in the Geneva Conventions.

Neutrality is not an easy solution. Acting neutral is often acting against ones natural instincts. When grave injustice is witnessed, the