

Centre for Land Warfare Studies (CLAWS)

**Talk by Mr. Gherardo Pontrandolfi, Head of ICRC Delegation, Afghanistan
on**

Afghanistan: Humanitarian Challenges & ICRC Response

21 May 2013

Opening remarks: Maj Gen Dhruv C Katoch SM, VSM (Retd), Director, CLAWS

The Director welcomed the ICRC delegation and introduced the panel to the audience. He stated that CLAWS has been consistently focussed on Afghanistan as the region was important to India. He thereafter gave a brief overview of the work done by the ICRC for the benefit of the audience.

Mr. Gherardo Pontrandolfi:

The drawdown of forces from Afghanistan impacts ICRC as it has around 1800 staff on the ground in Afghanistan. 2014 is indeed the deadline and as we speak the drawdown is taking place. There are lots of logistic operations going on across the country. Any change in the security scenario has implications for ICRC as humanitarian actors and for the economic and security landscape as well. Afghan National Army is increasingly taking over the security operations, but there is lot of unrest. About 20,000-50,000 incidents take place per year in Afghanistan. Civilian casualties are high. In 2012 there have been about 7,000 civilian casualties. There are also casualties suffered by ISAF and ANSF. What we see is a volatile situation and a resilient armed opposition.

On the humanitarian front, the civilian population particularly in rural areas is impacted by the effects of the military drawdown. There are still many disputed areas and the civilian population gets caught in the conflict. The fact is specific areas of the country are controlled by different actors in different moments in time. The civilian population face attack, threats, intimidation. Because of the military action and the drawdown civilians face difficulty in accessing basic services like health. This element will be one of the focus areas of ICRC in humanitarian terms. What the ICRC is working on is the cooperation with the Afghan National Army (ANA), with the national police and the local police. The ICRC imparts training in first aid to police forces and also in international humanitarian law to make them aware of their duties when they conduct combat operations. Efforts are also being made to address the capacity of the forces to evacuate the wounded. This medical evacuation is being coordinated with international military forces.

ICRC is also engaged in confidence dialogue with command structure, both international and Afghan, in upholding international law whenever there is allegation of breach of international law. This is a sensitive subject and the International forces have recognised the need for protecting and upholding law and in conducting operations in full compliance with international law. The dialogue with ANA is very positive. It is an army in the making. ICRC does that with armed opposition as well. It

differs in structure but it happens. ICRC wants to make sure that rules are respected by all the parties. Coming to the political challenges, presidential elections are due in 2014 and who the next president is will have a bearing on the future. As of now there are no indications of who will be the President. Conducting elections remains a huge security challenge. Holding free and fair elections in a country still facing armed conflicts is another challenge. There are too many parameters that determine the future of Afghanistan.

Economic situation needs consideration as Afghanistan is at the end of a war economy. Lot of money is going into the military. Foreign aid constitutes 90 per cent of the total GDP. If this money is going to dry up after the departure of international forces it will be a problem. The economic transition is thus crucial. International aid should continue and India too has heavily invested in Afghanistan. ICRC activities in Afghanistan will remain the largest humanitarian mission of ICRC. 2014 deadline is military deadline but doesn't change anything on the humanitarian side. ICRC has an agreement with the Afghan government and is committed to stay the course and carry out humanitarian activities in areas otherwise inaccessible to humanitarian actors. 2014 is not a deadline for ICRC. It is committed to stay and it has been there since 1987 throughout the Taliban time when they were in the government. The ICRC also carries out other activities as indicated below:

- Detention facilities: We keep visiting facilities time to time. We visit on average one facility per day and there are 109 such facilities. We individually monitor about 4000 detainees and are engaged in confidential dialogue with the concerned authorities to address any violation in terms of treatment and living conditions. ICRC not only teaches but also listens. It takes care of the families of the detainees by facilitating family visits and exchange of messages. We have facilitated about 3000 family visits to Bagram facility. We also exchanged 20,000 messages in the last year. ICRC works with armed opposition groups to see that captured soldiers are treated well. We transfer messages from hostages both, civilian and military, held by the armed opposition to the extent possible. Where personal visits are not possible, telephone calls and video conferences are arranged.
- Health activities: We support hospitals and health facilities and assist to improve facilities. Sustainable development requires support to existing structures in the long run and we ensure proper training for nursing staff and doctors. ICRC currently provides medical aid through 47 centres across the country. We also train the armed opposition groups in basic medical aid in the hope that they treat the wounded. In addition we provide access to safe drinking water and sewage facilities.
- Orthopaedic activities: 80,000 people have been treated so far including both civilian and armed forces. There is no differentiation between civilian and military people.

We need to build in structures that work. There is a need to make the system sustainable i.e. to train the Afghans. ICRC trains injured people who lost limbs to be

active members of society and hope that the future Afghan government will be able to do so in future.

Question & Answer session

Q. The Taliban have now opened a political office in Doha. Are you in touch with them and is there any agreement or understanding to enable you to work post 2014?

A. ICRC could not operate in Afghanistan without their acceptance and we have a dialogue at different levels which is crucial. ICRC doesn't have armed protection. We have no force protection and ICRC vehicles have no armed escorts. This facilitates easy movement and also gain acceptance. ICRC is not asking the help of the Taliban but it does need acceptance of all the armed actors to operate freely.

Q. Is the ICRC playing a role in education and in restoring state of governance?

A. ICRC is not a development organisation and it is not into state building. In education, ICRC is very focussed on promoting international law and building awareness of ICRC and its activities.

Q. Is the Taliban giving access to the prisoners that they hold of the ISAF?

A. Cannot get into the specific details due to confidentiality issues. There is a difference between a soldier and a civilian being held. A soldier need not have to be liberated by the opposite party during an ongoing conflict but a civilian is a hostage and has to be released unconditionally. ICRC has access to specific persons. We facilitate visits and exchange messages where possible.

Q. In the past ICRC has run programs on women in Afghanistan. Are there any going on now? You mentioned that there is no breakthrough in the peace and reconciliation commission so far. Is ICRC engaged in rural areas to build awareness for such a commission?

A. Women are particularly affected by conflict. Women play an incredible role in the society. We do have some activities but it's limited. ICRC is not into reconciliation. There are other trained actors for that. But we do convey messages when asked.

Q. Although the situation in Afghanistan is different now, what is the sense towards monarchy now?

A. There is a view that the king kept the country together and there are some who say the Taliban was better because there was a system that was functioning. The local justice was giving results so it is accepted. We have achieved a lot over the last ten to fifteen years in terms of democracy and elections are going to be held soon. There is an entire bandwidth of opinions across the breadth of the country so there is no clear cut view towards monarchy as of now.

Q. Having travelled in that area, do you see a sense of Afghan nationalism or do you see a distinct Pashtu nationalism in the south and non-Pashtu entity in the north?

A. It's not just Pashtu and non-Pashtu. It's finer than that. About Afghan nationalism I have no answer. Ethnicity is active and has always been but it's not limited to Pashtu

and non-Pashtu. At the end of the day, majority of the Afghan population is rural and they want to have a better life.

Vote of Thanks: Ms. Mary Werntz, Head of ICRC Regional Delegation, South Asia

Ms Werntz thanked Mr. Gerardo Pontrandolfi for the interesting exchange and answering the questions posed. She summarised the comments made by Mr. Pontrandolfi on the activities of ICRC in Afghanistan and reiterated that ICRC is committed to help Afghanistan in its humanitarian challenges. She called on the international community including India to continue their commitment in these troubled times. Finally she thanked the Director Gen Katoch and Deputy Director Col Verma and expressed her gratitude to the audience for the interaction. She then donated a set of books to CLAWS.