



# Power of humanity

Council of Delegates of the International Red Cross  
and Red Crescent Movement

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## War in Cities

BACKGROUND DOCUMENT

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Armed conflicts in urban areas have devastating and unacceptable humanitarian consequences. With nearly 70 per cent of the global population expected to be living in cities by 2050,<sup>1</sup> the humanitarian consequences of urban conflict are only set to worsen. When fighting engulfs cities, the suffering we witness is immense. We cannot allow this to become the new norm.

In recent years, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (Movement) has faced significant humanitarian, resourcing and diplomatic challenges in preventing and responding to human suffering during and after war in cities. Many recent conflicts have demonstrated the need for effective preventive actions and operational and communication responses to ensure better protection for civilians and greater respect for international humanitarian law (IHL). The Movement, as the world's largest humanitarian network, has a crucial and collective role to play in this endeavour.

As first responders, National Societies bear witness to the devastation caused by war in cities. For the past two and a half years, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the Norwegian Red Cross have consulted with a wide range of National Societies to identify common concerns and to consider how best to translate these concerns into concerted actions that can be adopted and implemented by the entire Movement.

The draft resolution "War in cities" and its annex the "2022–2027 Movement Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to the Humanitarian Impacts of War in Cities" (action plan) seek to strengthen the Movement's capacity to prevent and respond to the suffering caused by urban warfare. The action plan specifically aims to strengthen the Movement's collective capacity to (a) document the humanitarian impacts of war in cities; (b) strengthen the Movement's operational response to protect and assist people affected by urban warfare; (c) raise awareness through public communication of the Movement's humanitarian concerns; and (d) influence policy and practice through humanitarian diplomacy.

## 1) INTRODUCTION

Protracted armed conflicts are increasingly being fought in urban areas. This trend is being fuelled by the rate of the world's urbanization: the urban population grows by roughly 1.4 million people every week and is expected to represent nearly 70 per cent of the world's population by 2050.<sup>2</sup> The United Nations estimates that 90 per cent of the additional 2.3 billion urban dwellers will be in developing countries in Asia and Africa, with most of the growth expected in small- and medium-sized cities.

Mosul, Aleppo, Raqqa, Marawi, Gaza, Mogadishu, Donetsk, Tripoli and Sana'a: the reality of war in cities affects tens of millions of people; people who are at risk of being killed, injured or disabled, whose access to essential services has been cut off; people who have been displaced from their homes and are living in undignified conditions with no idea when they may return. Even after battles have ended, the social divisions caused by the fighting linger, and explosive remnants of war continue to kill and prevent people from returning home. This makes it difficult for cities and their inhabitants to heal, which in itself risks fomenting new waves of violence. The consequences of war in cities are not just the direct ones: death, injury and the loss of home and assets. Urban populations are dependent on markets and delivery systems for essential services to meet their needs. War in

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects*, United Nations, New York, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

cities negatively affects access to these systems, impeding people's ability to access basic services, from water and medical care to education for their children.

The Movement is on the front line of the humanitarian response to urban warfare. Every day, around the world, Red Cross and Red Crescent staff and volunteers respond with courage and dedication to the needs of people affected by war in cities. Urban settings are not new to the Movement. However, the sheer scale of the humanitarian consequences of urban warfare has, in recent years, created daunting operational, resource and diplomatic challenges.

To ensure civilians are better protected and respect for IHL is strengthened, the Movement must step up its preventive actions and operational responses. This document outlines the background, rationale, potential resource implications, suggested implementation methodologies and the draft content of the Council of Delegates resolution "War in cities" and its 2022–2027 action plan.

## 2) BACKGROUND

Since 2019, Movement components have been meeting to consider how to better prevent and respond to the humanitarian consequences of urban warfare. In October 2019, the National Societies of Iraq, Somalia and Norway, together with the ICRC, co-sponsored a Movement consultation in Oslo entitled "War in Cities: Towards a Comprehensive Response by the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement". This was followed by a spotlight session on urban warfare at the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in December 2019. The spotlight session highlighted the unacceptable humanitarian impacts of war in cities and the unique challenges that armed conflicts in urban areas present for the Movement's response.

In 2021, representatives of National Societies, the ICRC and the IFRC considered how to translate the urgent concerns and specific proposals put forward in Oslo in 2019 into concerted commitments that can be adopted and implemented by the entire Movement. An informal consultation process was therefore opened for all interested Movement components, with a view to providing the content for a draft resolution and action plan that would be submitted to the Council of Delegates for consideration. Three consultations took place in six online sessions between February and April 2021. Each of the consultations addressed a specific theme, producing content for different parts of a future action plan. A fourth consultation was organized, with two sessions in June 2021, to discuss a pre-zero draft resolution and an action plan for war in cities. The consultations generated fruitful discussions thanks to the active engagement of National Societies from a wide variety of contexts, particularly those most directly affected by war in cities.

## 3) ANALYSIS

Over the last decade, there has been a resurgence of urban warfare, with an estimated 50 million people around the world bearing the brunt of hostilities.<sup>3</sup> While war in cities is not a new phenomenon, recent factors are increasing the risk that towns and cities will become the major battlegrounds of future conflicts – if current trends are not reversed. These factors include the strategic importance of cities in economic, political and military terms, rapid urbanization and the tactical advantages that urban warfare may offer some parties to armed conflict.

Urban warfare is significantly deadlier for civilians than hostilities that take place outside populated areas. This is partly because of the density of the civilian population and the co-mingling of military objectives with civilians and civilian objects. Such proximity creates significant challenges for belligerents to fully comply with a cardinal rule of IHL: the rule of distinction.<sup>4</sup> For civilians caught up

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<sup>3</sup> ICRC, *Waging War in Cities: A Deadly Choice*, ICRC, Geneva, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> ICRC, *International Humanitarian Law and the Challenges of Contemporary Armed Conflicts: Recommitting to Protection in Armed Conflict on the 70th Anniversary of the Geneva Conventions*, ICRC, Geneva, 2019.

in urban hostilities, the consequences are devastating. Movement staff and volunteers witness first-hand the immense and multifaceted suffering that urban warfare causes daily to civilians.

Injury and death among civilians and damage to civilian and other protected objects occur on a dramatic scale. This can largely be attributed to explosive weapons with wide-area effects being used in urban areas. Although designed for the open battlefield, the weapons predominantly used in urban warfare today are heavy (mostly unguided) artillery, mortars and multibarrel rocket launchers, large bombs and missiles and improvised explosive devices. The significant likelihood of indiscriminate effects has previously prompted the Movement to call on States “to strengthen the protection of civilians from the indiscriminate use and effects of explosive weapons, including through the rigorous application of existing rules of international humanitarian law, and to avoid using explosive weapons with a wide impact area in densely populated areas”.<sup>5</sup>

In parallel, urban services that are indispensable for sustaining human life are disrupted by the direct, indirect and cumulative impact of hostilities. Too often, inhabitants are deprived of food, water, sanitation, solid waste disposal, electricity, health care and education.<sup>6</sup> These cuts to basic services are exacerbated when cities are besieged, when impartial humanitarian organizations are denied access to the civilian population and when urban conflicts become protracted.<sup>7</sup>

While many civilians may be unable to flee a besieged area, fighting in urban centres also results in mass displacement, permanently changing the landscape and social fabric of many towns and cities across the world. Unbearable conditions for civilians often force them to flee, usually at great risk to themselves.<sup>8</sup> They may be targeted, caught in the crossfire, mistreated by parties to the conflict or become separated from their family members. Once the fighting is over, unexploded ordnance, and other forms of weapon contamination, and a lack of essential services prevent many displaced people from returning, often for years.<sup>9</sup>

Many of these consequences are not unique to war in cities, but they occur on a significantly larger scale in urban warfare because of the density of the civilian population and civilian objects, the tactics and weapons used by the belligerents and the often protracted nature of urban fighting.

The complex and multilayered impacts of war in cities require a multidisciplinary, integrated and fit-for-purpose approach to be developed by the Movement, informed by our first-hand experience and our continued presence on the ground, even under the most challenging circumstances. Drawing on the lessons learned from past Movement frameworks and on our strength when working together, a long-term Movement action plan should span a range of areas to enrich our understanding of urban warfare and to enhance our collective response to it. It is proposed that the Movement’s commitments focus on the following interrelated objectives.<sup>10</sup>

## A) DOCUMENTING THE HUMANITARIAN IMPACTS

The collection and sharing of data on the humanitarian impacts of urban warfare are key to improving our analysis of the resultant causes of civilian harm. It is important to identify current information gaps, clarify the purposes of collecting information, and establish the conditions and procedures for

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<sup>5</sup> Resolution 7 of the 2013 Council of Delegates, “Weapons and international humanitarian law”, CD/13/R7, para. 4: <https://www.icrc.org/en/doc/assets/files/red-cross-crescent-movement/council-delegates-2013/cod13-r7-weapons-and-ihl-adopted-eng.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> ICRC, *Urban Services during Protracted Armed Conflict: A Call for a Better Approach to Assisting Affected People*, ICRC, Geneva, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> World Bank, ICRC and UNICEF, *Joining Forces to Combat Protracted Crises: Humanitarian and Development Support for Water and Sanitation Providers in the Middle East and North Africa*, World Bank, Washington, DC, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> ICRC, *Displaced in Cities: Experiencing and Responding to Urban Internal Displacement Outside Camps*, ICRC, Geneva, 2020.

<sup>9</sup> ICRC, *Weapon Contamination in Urban Settings: An ICRC Response*, ICRC, Geneva, 2019.

<sup>10</sup> The following sections build on the discussions held during the Movement consultations on war in cities held between February and June 2021.

sharing both data and human stories. Identifying indicators on the humanitarian impacts of urban warfare that are relevant for the Movement's prevention, preparedness, protection and assistance activities will aid the process. Specific actions are required to facilitate the collection and exchange of data within the Movement, and its effective use, notably by National Societies operating in contexts of urban warfare. Improvement in this area, in line with applicable guidance, such as the "Minimum Protection Approach",<sup>11</sup> depends on increasing material and expert support, including training on data collection and analysis for National Societies in affected contexts. The development of a framework for these activities should be in line with existing mandates, the Fundamental Principles, data protection requirements, accountability requirements, the "do no harm" principle, and other operational constraints.

## **B) STRENGTHENING THE MOVEMENT'S OPERATIONAL RESPONSE**

A core mission of the Movement is to protect and assist vulnerable people, including in situations of armed conflict. Components of the Movement have unique capacities to provide humanitarian protection and assistance during urban warfare. It is therefore proposed that a central purpose of the action plan should be to strengthen our joint operational response to war in cities. Such a response should notably (a) build on an improved collective analysis of our operational options in urban contexts; (b) put affected people at the centre of our approach while complying with the "do no harm" principle; (c) strengthen our assistance work, notably to ensure better access to essential services; and (d) strengthen existing partnerships and build new ones, as required. A key priority is how to better protect National Society staff and volunteers who face daily the risk of serious injury or death, in line with the Safer Access Framework. In addition, improving our collective operational response means supporting National Societies in affected contexts to build their capacities.

## **C) RAISING AWARENESS THROUGH PUBLIC COMMUNICATION**

The evidence-based documentation and analysis described above should contribute to the development of clear and effective communication narratives and key messages. The proposed Movement-wide communications campaign on war in cities should increase awareness about the grave humanitarian implications of urban warfare and build public and political support for efforts to prevent and mitigate its devastating consequences. The crafting of effective messages will rely on the articulation of our operational and strategic objectives, the clear definition and prioritization of our audiences and the identification of trusted sources in each context. A successful campaign should allow for messages to be contextualized for specific audiences and adapted to the different contexts where they will be used. The campaign should also explore innovative ways of reaching new audiences and consider new tools to amplify the impact of the Movement's messages and reaffirm its unique role within the public discussion on urban warfare.

## **D) INFLUENCING POLICY AND PRACTICE THROUGH HUMANITARIAN DIPLOMACY**

A humanitarian advocacy strategy is critical to raise awareness and mobilize political and military authorities to design, adopt and invest in approaches to urban combat that minimize civilian casualties and damage to civilian infrastructure. A concerted and systematic engagement with authorities at all levels is necessary to promote protective interpretations of IHL and to shape the legal and policy debate. Work to clarify and strengthen domestic and international legal and policy frameworks related to the conduct of hostilities in urban areas can make a real difference for affected populations.

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<sup>11</sup> The Movement's minimum standards for protection (i.e. the Minimum Protection Approach) approved by the Protection Advisory Board, which is made up of the ICRC, the IFRC and the National Societies of Norway, Nigeria, Sweden, Lebanon, Turkey, Australia and Belize.

In parallel, the promotion of best practice, based on the observations of the Movement and other actors on the ground, can influence the behaviour of belligerents. Public advocacy can create a community of concern that helps put the humanitarian consequences of urban warfare at the forefront of public debate. A focus on compliance with IHL and additional policy measures is proposed as a priority, including established Movement positions – notably on the unacceptable humanitarian consequences of the use of explosive weapons in populated areas and the promotion of national policy commitments to avoid such use.

#### **4) RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS**

The daunting humanitarian consequences of war in cities generate a responsibility for our Movement to step up its preventive and operational responses. The effective implementation of the proposed action plan is therefore expected to have resource implications. Implementation of the draft commitments outlined in the action plan may partly utilize existing financial and human resources. For example, the draft commitments related to communications and humanitarian diplomacy (sections C and D of the action plan, respectively) may be implemented, to some extent, without the need for additional financial and/or human resources. However, the draft commitments related to the coordination of the implementation, monitoring and evaluation (section E of the action plan) and the compilation and development of analyses, tools, systems, methodologies and training modules (notably in section A of the action plan) are expected to require *some* investment in human resources. Full implementation of the draft commitments related to the Movement's operational response – notably to strengthen key elements in staff and volunteers' security and to develop and deploy, where appropriate, a rapid reaction capacity to ensure access to essential services (section B of the action plan) – may require a more significant investment in financial and human resources.

The need to commit financial and human resources in order for the action plan to be a success is also reflected in the action plan's draft commitment by all Movement components to “mobilize additional resources to support implementation of the action plan, notably to support National Societies operating in contexts of urban warfare”, as feasible and in line with existing priorities.

#### **5) IMPLEMENTATION AND MONITORING**

The draft resolution invites the ICRC to support and coordinate the implementation of the Movement's action plan, and to monitor and report on its implementation, as required.

As outlined in section E of the action plan on implementation, there is a need to ensure that all components of the Movement, particularly National Societies operating in a context of urban warfare, are empowered to effectively implement the Movement's commitments. The ICRC will therefore, in consultation with the IFRC and National Societies, “develop an implementation monitoring and evaluation plan and convene a Movement Reference Group on War in Cities to guide and support the implementation of this action plan”.

Recognizing that the Movement has a key role to play in shaping the future debate on urban warfare, the resolution and action plan are intended to guide the Movement towards a united, clear and strong position on the need to prevent and respond to the devastating consequences of urban warfare at the 34th International Conference in 2023 and beyond. As noted above, the resolution and action plan also urge States to use the occasion of the International Conference in 2023 to prevent and reduce the grave humanitarian consequences of urban warfare, including by providing resources to support implementation of the Movement's action plan.

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## Conclusion and recommendations

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The draft resolution “War in cities” and its annex the “2022–2027 Movement Action Plan to Prevent and Respond to the Humanitarian Impacts of War in Cities” seek to strengthen the Movement’s capacity to prevent and respond to the suffering caused by urban warfare. The draft action plan contains a set of commitments to be carried out by the ICRC, the IFRC and National Societies, as necessary and feasible, until the 2027 Council of Delegates.

Specifically, the action plan aims to improve the Movement’s collective capacity to (a) document the humanitarian impacts of war in cities; (b) strengthen the Movement’s operational response to protect and assist people affected by urban warfare; (c) raise awareness through public communication of the Movement’s humanitarian concerns; and (d) influence policy and practice through humanitarian diplomacy. It proposes detailed actions for the Movement to commit to undertake and identifies specific responsibilities for Movement components to implement.