Operations in the Former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, Sudan, and Afghanistan

The ICRC’s unspoken mission of undermining brutal civil wars has the most success when political/military agents of the international community join humanitarian workers in intervening in these wars. Even without the intervention of a political force, ICRC and NGO efforts still soften the horrors of the internal wars and make them more susceptible to resolution.

Ending post-Cold War internal wars, it must be remember, requires the political/military operations of third parties. The warring parties are too weak, too distrustful of the other side. They need the security guarantees of powerful third parties to end their wars. The more outside forces combine to intervene in wars, the more likely conflict resolution will occur. This is most evident in the former Yugoslavia, but it is also true for the wars in El Salvador, Haiti, Guatemala, the Israeli occupied territories, and Mozambique. It is somewhat less evident in Chechnya, Cambodia, Angola, and Rwanda, although there is some progress being made in these wars toward a diplomatic settlement.

If powerful political/military forces do not intervene or if they intervene weakly or pull out, then the operations of the ICRC and NGOs tend to disrupt the war, weaken the warring parties, and interfere with their power relations. This prolongs the war, often propelling it into slow motion or fits and starts. We see this situation in Liberia, Somalia, Afghanistan, Sudan, Kurdistan, Tajikistan, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Ngorny Karabakh/Azerbaijan, and East Timor/Indonesia. Making wars dysfunctional eventually makes them ripe for resolution and produces a request by the warring parties for third-party mediation.*

The path to terminating war is paved by urging the intervention of members of the international community. This is always in the minds of ICRC delegates in the field, and, for the unspoken mission, is key. Encouraging third-party intervention is the ICRC’s most important task for ending internal

*It is possible for the warring parties, if the more powerful side can isolate the conflict, to come to a settlement with little third-party mediation. Russia, with minimal assistance from the OSCE, has moved toward resolving its unfortunate civil war with the Chechens.

N.O. Berry, War and the Red + Cross
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wars. Humanitarian tasks also promote this mission, even though they are framed as carrying out the main mission of humanitarian assistance and protection. These five tasks are: 1) protecting and relieving the suffering of civilians; 2) reporting the extent of the suffering and the war crimes that have caused it; 3) visiting prisoners and detainees; 4) reconciling the warring parties and civilians on all sides; and 5) disseminating international humanitarian law (the laws of war) to political authorities, fighters, and civilians.

We will illustrate the ICRC's unspoken mission in action by looking at two cases where third-party intervention was sufficiently massive to bring the warring parties to the brink of peace. The wars in the former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda have moved beyond the indescribable brutality of the past and are now finally able to be resolved with reduced difficulty by the UN or members of the international community. It is true, at the time of this writing, that the United States' policy of weakening the UN and its peacekeeping capabilities by refusing to pay its dues could take away the capability of UN-sponsored efforts to end wars. However, with U.S. troops and prestige committed to fulfilling the Dayton Accord in the former Yugoslavia and with the NATO-led peacekeeping force in place, it is unlikely the war will be allowed to resume. Rwanda is much more problematic.

We will also look at two cases in which political/military third parties are unfortunately not heavily involved: Sudan and Afghanistan. Even so, the ICRC's operations have helped undermine the effectiveness of these wars.

ON THE ROAD TO RESOLUTION: TWO CASES

The Former Yugoslavia

The Context of the War

Both the unity of multinational Yugoslavia and the motives for its recent disintegration go back to World War II. Major elements of the Slovene, Croatian, and Muslim population sided with the German occupation and, with the Germans, proceeded to slaughter about 350,000 Serbs. Major elements of the Serbs and also portions of the other nationalities conducted guerrilla warfare against the German side under the communist leadership of Josip Broz Tito. With Allied help, Tito won. He proceeded to unify the state under a federation of republics and autonomous areas dominated by the Communist Party. In addition to the stature of Tito and the brutal efficiency of the Communist police state, Yugoslavia was held together by the threat of invasion from the Soviet bloc, still a possibility after Stalin's 1948 failed attempt to subvert Tito.