EDITORIAL

The evolution of humankind is largely dependent on the quality of the environment and the resources it provides, and the natural environment plays a vital role in ensuring the survival of present and future generations. The earth and its environment are potentially under threat because of numerous human-induced factors, and climate change may drastically alter the conditions of human sustainability.

The consequences of climate change on communities are increasingly being felt in many parts of the planet. Climate change is not merely an environmental, scientific, or economic issue; it has become a humanitarian issue too. Increased climate variability and greater intensity and frequency of extreme weather events aggravate humanitarian needs in emergencies and lead to water and food stress, as well as to changing patterns in the geographical spread of diseases. Over the last two decades the number of recorded disasters has doubled from approximately 200 to over 400 per year, while over the last decade the number of people affected has tripled.

The effects of climate change will most likely have a major impact on population movement and settlement, whether within countries or across borders. While migration may be a form of adaptation for some, the many millions of people forcibly displaced by sudden or slow-onset disasters will be particularly vulnerable and will require substantial humanitarian assistance and protection.

The scale of the potential humanitarian challenge that climate change may present is indeed staggering. The heads of organizations of the Inter-Agency Standing Committee and its Task Force on Climate Change, which is co-chaired by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, have therefore alerted the international community to it. Although the response of the international community to the challenges of climate change needs to be structural and systemic, the humanitarian response should not be overlooked. Efforts to mitigate climate change must be supplemented by adaptation to its consequences in order to improve the resilience of communities vis-à-vis its unavoidable effects.

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Environmental degradation may also become an accelerator or even a trigger for conflict. Nevertheless, care must be taken not to draw direct causal links between climate change and armed conflict, for they are poor predictors that fail to capture

the complexity of the interlinkages between the physical consequences of climate change and effects such as migration or conflict. Many conditions – economic, social, political – are required before the consequences of climate change metamorphose into an armed conflict, and drawing simplistic causal links may ultimately lead to inappropriate responses.

However, observations clearly indicate that the less developed countries – which have contributed the least to climate change – and the most destitute communities within any given society are those that are affected the most, as their adaptive capacities are the lowest. This discrepancy has led some to coin the expression 'climate justice' conveying the moral and economic necessity to develop a system of response to climate change whereby the polluters pay. It also gives a hint as to what may, in the next few decades, become a defining element in the relationship between the 'North' and the 'South'.

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Discussions over environmental degradation have tended to focus essentially on climate change. It is, however, important not to lose sight of the broader perspective: climate change is not the only cause of environmental degradation, though it is a massive one. Other causes such as deforestation, water, air, or soil pollution, overuse of natural resources, demographic pressure, and urbanization trigger the same set of social and humanitarian consequences as climate change but tend to be ignored these days in the public debate.

The environment has also regularly been a casualty of war. The serious harm done to the natural environment during a number of armed conflicts has only added to the vulnerability of those affected by the fighting. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) accordingly believes that the need to clarify and expand international humanitarian law on environmental protection should be addressed by the states.

As a first step, it intends to update its 1994 *Guidelines for Military Manuals and Instructions on the Protection of the Environment in Times of Armed Conflict.* But the law protecting the environment during armed conflict is not always clear, nor is it sufficiently developed. There are basic deficiencies in the existing body of international humanitarian law relating to protection of the environment during hostilities. The definition of impermissible environmental damage is both restrictive and unclear; there are legal uncertainties regarding the protection of elements of the environment as civilian objects; and application of the principle of proportionality where harm to the environment constitutes incidental damage is equally problematic. In addition, treaty law does not contain any specific requirement to protect and preserve the environment during non-international armed conflict. In the ICRC *Study on the Current State of International Humanitarian Law*, published in this edition of the *Review*, preventive action, a reinforced protection regime, and the need to address the immediate and long-term consequences of damage to the environment have been identified as areas of particular concern.

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The ICRC is also aware of its own responsibilities with regard to environmental degradation. As a leading humanitarian organization, it has a key role to play in issuing a clear message calling for environmental issues that affect the victims of armed conflict to be taken into account, while ensuring that the victims themselves remain central to its programmes. Its *Framework for Environmental Management in Assistance Programmes* is a first practical move towards formalizing an ICRC approach to environmental issues and fits into the broader environmental concern of the organization as a whole. It encourages field operations personnel to systematically assess, identify, and understand the potential environmental impacts and implications of their activities, and to take initiatives to reduce negative impacts and to enhance the efficiency, appropriateness, and quality of the ICRC's programmes.

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