CCW Thirteenth Conference of High-Contracting Parties to Protocol V on Explosive Remnants of War
Monday, 11 November 2019

General Statement by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

Thank you, Madam President.

At the outset, allow me to warmly welcome, on behalf of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Benin as the newest High-Contracting Party to Protocol V on Explosive Remnants of War.

In many parts of the world, explosive remnants of war continue to kill and maim thousands of civilians each year during and long after active hostilities have ended. Latest data indicates that almost 70% of these victims are children.

We often think of the long-term humanitarian impact of ERW, but the presence of unexploded ordnance aggravates civilian suffering during armed conflict: it can impede access to health-care facilities, block escape routes, and hinder the delivery of life-saving humanitarian assistance.

When guns and bombs fall silent, unexploded ordnance continue to present a lethal hazard for civilians, by blocking access to critical services or infrastructure, hampering agriculture, trade and development, and hindering humanitarian operations. Their presence can prevent the return of displaced persons to their places or residence, and significantly delay reconstruction efforts and impede socio-economic development. Moreover, the existence of abandoned explosive ordnance can fuel the uncontrolled availability of weapons, thereby prolonging armed conflicts and triggering instability and armed violence.

The ICRC continues to witness these effects of ERW in its day-to-day operations in armed conflicts and in post-conflict situations.
Madam President,

Conflict is increasingly taking place in towns and cities with the use by all parties of heavy explosive weapons. Recent and ongoing conflicts, be it in Ukraine, or in parts of Africa and the Middle East, are clear examples. In urban areas the humanitarian impact of ERW is multiplied, not only due to the sheer density of civilian population and civilian structures – including critical infrastructure that support life-sustaining services such as water and electricity supply – but also due to the challenges of conducting clearance of UXO in such environments.

The ICRC appreciated the panel discussion on clearance of ERW in urban areas held during the Expert Meeting last August. As those discussions highlighted, locating unexploded ordnance in the midst of rubble and identifying them amongst a wide array of everyday use objects, many of which are made of similar material (e.g. metal), is an onerous, often extremely time-consuming, task. This is made worse in contexts where mines or booby-traps may also be present. An additional challenge is the presence of mortal remains: clearance operations must ensure that such remains are treated and recovered in a dignified and appropriate manner and in a way that will facilitate their identification, which can further lengthen the pace of clearance.

Protocol V requires that High-Contracting Parties and parties to armed conflicts take all reasonable and feasible measures to mark and remove ERW after the cessation of active hostilities. While States have a primary responsibility in this respect, cooperation with other actors, notably humanitarian mine action organizations, to implement the Protocol’s provisions is essential. Important elements of such cooperation include allowing access to affected areas by humanitarian mine action operators, providing them with security guarantees so that they can carry out their work, and providing the necessary legal and import permissions to bring in essential equipment.

The ICRC is active in over 30 countries, including Iraq, Myanmar, Pakistan, Syria, Ukraine and Yemen, to prevent the effects of ERW, often in cooperation with national Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. Our work consists mainly of risk-education and other risk-reduction activities aimed at improving the resilience of communities affected by weapon contamination. In terms of surveying and clearing ERW, the ICRC prioritizes mobilizing national authorities and helping them strengthen their ability to do so. When necessary, the ICRC deploys specialized teams to survey and clear weapon-contaminated areas in cooperation and in coordination with stakeholders.

**Recording, retaining and transmitting information** on the use or abandonment of explosive ordnance as per Article 4 of the Protocol is critical in addressing the ERW problem, both for facilitation of
clearance as well as for reducing the risk they pose to civilians. Similarly, **generic preventive measures and measures to ensure the safe and secure management of ammunition stockpiles** can go a long way in protecting civilians from the daily threat of ERW.

Madam President,

We must not forget that the object and purpose of Protocol V is humanitarian. **Victim Assistance** should therefore remain at the heart of High-Contracting Parties’ considerations, and we commend Finland for organizing a panel to address this aspect at the August Expert Meeting. In Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Central African Republic – to name but a few – ICRC medical and rehabilitation facilities treat victims of ERW on a daily basis. ICRC moreover works with national authorities on capacity-building, to enable States to provide immediate, short- and long-term victim assistance, including the socio-economic reintegration of survivors. In 2018, the ICRC supported 189 projects, including physical rehabilitation centres, component factories and training institutions. Through these projects, 12,412 new patients were fitted with prostheses, while 50,804 new patients were fitted with orthoses.

We are deeply grateful to the High-Contracting Parties that support our work on weapon contamination and victim assistance through their generous contributions to the ICRC’s annual Special Appeal on Disability and Mine Action.

The ICRC remains committed to promoting the universalization and effective implementation of Protocol V, which are of crucial importance if civilians and their communities are to be protected from the indiscriminate harm caused by ERW. We look forward to a successful Conference.

Thank you, Madam President.