



# PETER MAURER

President of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)

## Thierry de MONTBRIAL

Mr. President, first of all thank you for being here. My first question is this: we imagine the Red Cross in a sort of historic continuity, Solferino, etc., but, like everything else, it is changing. So what is changing, particularly under your leadership?

## Peter MAURER

It is not so much because of my leadership that things are changing. It is rather that the world around us is changing, forcing us to adapt some of our methods, which have proven their worth in very different times and contexts. As you know, the ICRC was created in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the aim, as an institution, of promoting international humanitarian law and humanitarian relief where it is needed. With the ICRC's founding, humanitarian action became a fully-fledged political preoccupation of governments, and it still is today. The ICRC developed enduring practices within that framework: we act in the heart of conflicts; we are near the front lines to help civilian populations; we invoke the law to protect people affected by war and violence. But our activities are not limited to softening the effects of violence: we want to change the behaviour of the parties to conflicts by persuading them to comply with international humanitarian law. These practices, methods and goals still guide the ICRC's action.

What is changing, on the other hand, are the dynamics fuelling conflicts, the environment in which we operate. The ICRC's budget has nearly doubled in the past five years, proof that something is awry in the world. We are worried about the increasingly blurred lines between state and non-state actors, which are becoming more fragmented; military strategies that increasingly flout the norms of international humanitarian law; and the magnitude of the repercussions of war and widespread violence against civilian populations. Take the conflicts in the Middle East: in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, we are witnessing population movements and a collapse of social systems on a scale unprecedented in recent history. We have never recorded as many attacks against hospitals, humanitarian workers and doctors as in the past 10 years. Today, civilian populations bear the brunt of conflicts, while everything should be done to protect them.

During the previous meeting, we discussed investment in Africa and other unstable regions. But how can you invest in regions where violence is rife and societies are fragmented? These changes compel us to adapt our resources and activities, step up assistance to civilian populations, redouble our efforts to protect them and intensify our humanitarian diplomacy and activities in order to obtain access and modify behaviour. Recent developments also prompt us to review the policy of discretion we have always followed. Confidentiality is our golden rule. We remain convinced that confidentiality helps to move things in the right direction, but we cannot remain silent when confronted with the appalling atrocities that continue to take place before our eyes, in the public realm or on social media.

All that is to say we are constantly trying to find the right balance between loyalty to our history and the need to adjust to new circumstances.

Lastly, as you may have noticed, we are very attentive and open to technological innovations. I just spent a week on the west coast of the United States meeting the heads of major digital companies. You have heard of the Digital Geneva Convention project published by Brad Smith of Microsoft. Starting now, we must be concerned about the possibility of a future cyberwar, adapt our working methods to new technologies, position ourselves in an increasingly connected world and make the most of new technology to reach the populations affected as well as parties to conflicts.

## Thierry de MONTBRIAL

Thank you. I remember the first time we met in your office in Geneva. You said the Red Cross was the organisation that had by far the best understanding of the conflict in Syria. So it would be interesting if you could comment on that example, which is essential today. But that also leads to a subsidiary question, which is a rather old one. To carry out

its activities, the Red Cross must have access to the most repellent figures, dictators, etc., who must trust it enough to know that nothing that will have been said will be divulged, which raises extraordinarily, and interesting, thorny ethical issues. This is nothing new for the Red Cross. It was true in the past and will probably be true in the future. Perhaps it is worth commenting on that.

**Peter MAURER**

You are actually asking me two questions, Thierry. One is about our specificity. In the realm of humanitarian organisations, we are a rather interesting combination: the ICRC is a Swiss NGO given a universal mandate by the States party to the Geneva Conventions but not controlled by them, which boosts its credibility as a neutral, impartial and independent organisation. This *sui generis* status is important for being able to work in challenging contexts. Of course, it allows us to have access to places and people other actors deem disreputable.

Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions authorises us to have contact with all the parties, State and non-State. The biggest problem today is that the parties to conflicts do not want to dialogue with us. We must go through intermediaries in order to open doors. The desire to maintain dialogue with all the actors involved while not lending their actions any legitimacy remains at the heart of our work.

Our specificity also lies in our conception of confidentiality and how we use it. When is it necessary to frankly and publically speak out? When, on the other hand, is it necessary to remain silent? There is a delicate balance between the two. As a general rule, we try to maintain trust and confidentiality as long as possible, which allows us to exert our influence and change behaviour. When we take a public stand, it is not necessarily because of the atrocities or violence we have witnessed, but because the parties involved have shown a lack of willingness to change or at least make credible efforts to change.

Our specificity also lies in our unique relationship to the national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies, a huge network allowing us to be where others cannot go, act on the international, national and local levels, represent civil society and at the same time have special contacts with States.

That is why we are often the only or one of the few international actors working in the hardest-to-reach areas. We are in the rural zones of Afghanistan; places in southern Somalia controlled by al-Shabaab; parts of Syria that are generally impossible to enter; northern Mali; and the Lake Chad region in northern Nigeria.

**Thierry de MONTBRIAL**

I understand that very well and I think many people in this room understand that very well, but we are living in the age of the ideology of transparency. Today's ethical concepts are no longer exactly what they were, even quite recently. That must put you in a tough spot sometimes. Again, it is a question of society. But today the word "transparency" is on everybody's lips. We must have access to everything and there must be no secrets or excessive confidentiality. How do you deal with this issue?

**Peter MAURER**

If there is one area where dilemmas abound, it is the humanitarian one.

**Thierry de MONTBRIAL**

Precisely. Moreover, you're a diplomat. I think that's a tradition.

**Peter MAURER**

If you dislike dilemmas, don't work for a humanitarian organisation.

**Thierry de MONTBRIAL**

Or become a diplomat.

**Peter MAURER**

Or become a diplomat. We do neutral, impartial and independent work in highly politicised contexts. The current period demands increasing transparency whereas our tradition favours confidentiality. We champion principles while constantly negotiating. How do we overcome those dilemmas? By trying to apply credible guidelines and devising approaches grounded in experience.

Confidentiality and transparency are two different things. Transparency does not necessarily mean that everybody must know everything all the time. But accountability mechanisms must be set up. That is what we have done. We have devised a system of governance based on accountability to our private donors and the States party to the Geneva Conventions. But that does not keep us, in certain situations, from applying the confidentiality rule for operational reasons. If I started describing, even at this private forum, what we see every year visiting a million prisoners in 102 countries, tomorrow we would no longer have access to those prisons. If I started telling you about the violations of international humanitarian law we witness on the front lines, tomorrow we would be forced out, depriving local civilian populations of vital assistance. We are highly aware that all those situations require continuously trying to find an extremely delicate balance.

I also think that today we can talk about certain recurring problems in a more general way. For example, we have worked extensively to raise awareness of a public initiative called “Health Care in Danger” (HCiD), which we launched with professionals from around the world. It does not focus on a specific situation, but summarises trends involving attacks on doctors, pressure on medical ethics, the destruction of hospitals, etc. Such a campaign can be carried out without mentioning specific violations observed in a particular context. Yet, that is how we contributed to the Security Council’s adoption of resolution 2286 without revealing the details of the 2,500 attacks that were reported to us. We verified the accuracy of those reports and identified the sites where the attacks occurred as well as the people who carried them out.

Today we rely on intermediaries with influence over the parties to conflicts. The reason is to put messages across to them with the aim of implementing a more assertive humanitarian diplomacy. Everybody knows that wars don’t happen by chance. There are not only the belligerents but also the actors behind the scenes. I think it is important to talk to them and stress the cost of disorganised, unlimited violence and violations of law.

**Thierry de MONTBRIAL**

Thank you. Everything you have just said is extremely important. From a philosophical point of view, finding that balance, which could be summed up as the balance between the ethics of responsibility and the ethics of conviction, is a Gordian knot. The dilemma can be approached from various perspectives, but I think you have been extremely clear about it.

**Peter MAURER**

I would just like to say one more thing, something that calms me down when I have doubts about the public position to take. Given the ambiguity of the conflicts we face, it must be accepted that not all the actors do and say the same thing. From my viewpoint, the ICRC’s confidentiality, its specificity as a humanitarian organisation, its methodology, which I have just described, is part of a much broader effort being made by the whole humanitarian and international community. I am highly aware that a UN agency under State control cannot have the same interpretation of neutrality and impartiality as an independent humanitarian organisation, because States require something else, but it can act in a different way.

**Peter MAURER**

I think the penal approach at the national and international levels has its reasons for existing, just as the neutral and impartial humanitarian approach does. They are not mutually exclusive. They are potentially complementary and can be implemented in the same system or different periods. There is a time for each of the two approaches. In today’s

crises, in the situations of extreme instability facing us, I think our methods help us save lives and lay the groundwork for more sustainable development.

**Thierry de MONTBRIAL**

I would like to ask you one last question before taking two or three comments from the floor. My last question is a good illustration of the problem. What can you tell an audience like ours about what has made you feel proudest in recent years? What are you most proud of? What can you tell us, knowing that you probably cannot mention what your most impressive achievement has been?

**Peter MAURER**

I am very proud of what my organisation, especially the ICRC employees negotiating on the front lines, has accomplished. I gave you figures and said our budget is increasing. On the one hand, that is an indication that the world is in a sorrowful state, but on the other it is also a sign that the ICRC remains a relevant humanitarian actor. In other words, if we are still working in the field, with a budget twice the size it was five years ago, it is because we have access to the hardest-to-reach places, creating neutral humanitarian spaces, saving lives and rebuilding societies. I am very proud that every day, our colleagues in the field manage to dialogue with the parties to conflicts in order to persuade them to set up those neutral spaces. Nevertheless, that does not change the fact that the impact of violence always outstrips our ability to soften its effects.

The second thing I am proud of, which is connected to what I have just said, is our ability to establish relationships, create networks of influence, and therefore dialogue with the parties involved. Here is an example. The work we did in Najaf with the ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq's highest Shiite religious authority, led to his issuing a fatwa on the behaviour of bearers of weapons, very close to what the Geneva Conventions say. It is not by chance that the ayatollah told people carrying weapons to follow those rules. He even issued a second fatwa on respect for the humanity of prisoners. Things can be changed through long discussions with influential actors like him. We have been actively trying to do that in various parts of the world in recent years. Preventive measures are a bit like faith. I cannot prove they save lives, but persuading the highest authorities to clearly say what is legal and illegal in wartime remains important and necessary. Through our action, I think we manage to show that international humanitarian law remains relevant.