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General debate on all disarmament
and international security agenda items

Statement by Ms. Christine Beerli
Vice President
International Committee of the Red Cross

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Mr. Chair, Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to address the First Committee today, to bring the field-based experience of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and our expertise in international humanitarian law (IHL) to bear on some of the critical issues that will be discussed here.

For the ICRC, debates about weapons must always consider evidence of their foreseeable human costs in light of the strict limits imposed by IHL on the use of weapons.

Mr. Chair,

States have a unique opportunity to make this 71st session of the UN General Assembly a turning point for progress towards prohibiting and completely eliminating the most destructive weapon ever invented – nuclear weapons.

The international community now has before it overwhelming evidence of the horrific, long-term and irreversible effects of these weapons on health, the environment, climate and food production – that is, on everything on which human life depends. Already twenty years ago, based on evidence before it, the International Court of Justice (in its Advisory Opinion on the Legality of the Threat or Use of Nuclear Weapons) found that the effects of nuclear weapons could not be contained in space or time, and concluded that the use of these weapons “would generally be contrary to” the principles and rules of IHL.

Since then, additional new evidence of the indiscriminate effects and unspeakable suffering caused by nuclear weapons has emerged, and was presented at three international conferences on the humanitarian impact of nuclear weapons. The evidence includes a key finding of the ICRC’s own studies, and those of UN agencies, that there is no adequate humanitarian response capacity to assist the victims of nuclear weapons.

The “catastrophic humanitarian consequences of any use of nuclear weapons” were explicitly recognized six years ago by all States party to the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), and in several resolutions adopted since then by a large majority of States in the First Committee. These include resolutions on “Follow-up to the 2013 high-level meeting of the General Assembly on nuclear disarmament” and on the “Humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons”.

Having recognized these consequences, States now have a responsibility to take decisive action. And they have an unprecedented opportunity to do so, by acting on the recommendation adopted by the UN Open-Ended Working Group “Taking Forward Multilateral Nuclear Disarmament Negotiations” in August with widespread support, that the General Assembly convene a conference in 2017, open to all, to negotiate a treaty “to prohibit nuclear weapons, leading towards their total elimination”.

In 2011, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, of which the ICRC is a part, appealed to all States to “pursue in good faith and conclude with urgency and determination negotiations to prohibit the use of and completely eliminate nuclear weapons through a legally binding international agreement, based on existing commitments and international obligations”. The Movement welcomes that, five years later, such negotiations
may become a reality through an inclusive process in the framework of the UN General Assembly.

Although the prohibition of nuclear weapons is only one of the measures needed to ensure they are never again used and are eliminated, it is an indispensable building block in reaching the universal goal of a world free of nuclear weapons. As with chemical and biological weapons, unambiguous prohibition is both the foundation for disarmament and a disincentive for proliferation. It would be a long-awaited step towards fulfilling the NPT’s Article VI obligation to pursue effective measures to achieve nuclear disarmament, and repeated undertakings under NPT Action Plans.

If some States are unable at this time to join negotiations for the prohibition of nuclear weapons, we nevertheless continue to call on them to urgently take interim steps to reduce the immediate risks of intentional or accidental use of nuclear weapons. Such steps include reducing the role of nuclear weapons in military doctrine and plans, and reducing the number of warheads on high alert. These and other risk-reduction measures derive from long-standing political commitments, including the Action Plan of the 2010 NPT Review Conference, and should be followed through as a matter of urgency. Given the catastrophic humanitarian consequences of nuclear weapons, any risk of use is unacceptable.

Today's complex security environment highlights the urgency of both the prohibition of nuclear weapons and action by nuclear-armed States to fulfil their existing obligations and political commitments, leading to the elimination of nuclear weapons once and for all.

Mr. Chair,

Debates in the First Committee have highlighted increasing concerns about the weaponization and hostile use of outer space, with virtually all States seeking to prevent an arms race in outer space. For the ICRC, diplomatic initiatives should give due consideration to the potentially far-reaching humanitarian consequences on earth that would result from direct attacks against “dual-use” satellites (i.e. those used for both military and civilian purposes) or incidental damage to civilian satellites, and the limits already imposed by IHL on any form of warfare, including in space. Use of force in outer space – be it through kinetic or non-kinetic means, using space- or ground-based weapons – could have significant knock-on effects on civilian infrastructure, health-care services and humanitarian operations that depend on satellite communication, navigation and timing, and imagery networks. The vulnerability of space-based systems that serve essential civilian activity on earth presents significant challenges for respecting the IHL rules of distinction, proportionality and precautions in attack, which States should thoroughly weigh up in their deliberations on outer space.

The ICRC is gravely concerned by the use of classical and improvised chemical weapons in Syria over the last three years, confirmed by fact-finding missions of the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. While such use has been roundly condemned by the international community, there continue to be allegations of new use of chemical weapons in Syria and elsewhere. At this session of the First Committee, States should reaffirm the absolute prohibitions on using chemical and biological weapons in armed conflict by any actor – State or non-State – in any type of armed conflict. The ICRC urges the handful of States that remain outside of chemical and biological weapons conventions to adhere to them without delay.
Under these conventions and customary IHL, every State has a duty to criminalize, prosecute and punish the use of chemical or biological weapons by any individual under its jurisdiction or control.

Current and recent armed conflicts – such as those in Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Yemen, Iraq and Gaza – continue to expose the particularly devastating effects on civilians of heavy explosive weapons when used in populated areas. Large bombs and missiles, indirect-fire weapon systems such as mortars, rockets and artillery, multi-barrel rocket launchers, and certain types of improvised explosive devices, are prone to indiscriminate effects when used in population centres, owing to their wide-area effects. In addition to the high risk of incidental civilian death, injury and disability, heavy explosive weapons tend to cause extensive damage to critical civilian infrastructure, triggering debilitating “domino effects” on interconnected essential services such as health care, and water and electricity supply systems. This in turn provokes further civilian death and displacement. And these effects are exacerbated in protracted armed conflicts.

While there is no question that IHL permits parties to armed conflicts to attack military targets located in populated areas, it also constrains their choice of means and methods to do so, with the aim of protecting civilians from unacceptable harm. The ICRC welcomes that a growing number of States are engaging on this crucial humanitarian issue, and we encourage them to share how they put into practice the constraints of IHL on their choice of weapons in urban warfare. We continue to call on States and parties to armed conflict to avoid using explosive weapons with a wide impact area in densely populated areas, owing to the significant likelihood of indiscriminate effects.

It is clear that the tremendous human suffering generated by brutal armed conflicts, notably in parts of the Middle East and Africa, is also a consequence of the flow of conventional arms to warring parties that completely disregard IHL. As the ICRC is witnessing on a daily basis in its field operations, irresponsible arms transfers are facilitating serious violations of IHL, including acts of terrorism and sexual and gender-based violence. It is imperative that all States urgently fulfil their duty to ensure respect for IHL in their arms transfer decisions. This duty underlies the transfer prohibitions and export assessments under the Arms Trade Treaty, which the ICRC urges all States to join and faithfully implement. Ceasing the supply of weapons to parties to armed conflicts that violate IHL will reduce human suffering and ultimately contribute to creating the conditions for regional and global security.

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