

# RCRC

**Red Cross Red Crescent**

2019 issue [www.rcrcmagazine.org](http://www.rcrcmagazine.org)

## Trust in action

Venezuelan volunteers building trust day in, day out

## Helpers in handcuffs

New laws and sanction regimes criminalize even small acts of kindness

## The unseen faces of climate change

People who suffer the brunt of the climate crisis speak out

**This person can save your life**

**ACCEPT?**

**BLOCK?**

# Trust

**A question of life and death**



THE MAGAZINE OF THE INTERNATIONAL  
RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT MOVEMENT

# **The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement** is made up of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and the National Societies.



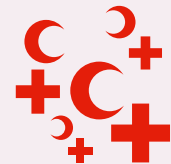
**ICRC**

**The International Committee of the Red Cross** is an impartial, neutral and independent organization whose exclusively humanitarian mission is to protect the lives and dignity of victims of armed conflict and other situations of violence and to provide them with assistance. The ICRC also endeavours to prevent suffering by promoting and strengthening humanitarian law and universal humanitarian principles. Established in 1863, the ICRC is at the origin of the Geneva Conventions and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It directs and coordinates the international activities conducted by the Movement in armed conflicts and other situations of violence.



International Federation of  
Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

**The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC)** is the world's largest volunteer-based humanitarian network, reaching 150 million people each year through its 190 member National Societies. Together, the IFRC acts before, during and after disasters and health emergencies to meet the needs and improve the lives of vulnerable people. It does so with impartiality as to nationality, race, gender, religious beliefs, class and political opinions.



**National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies** embody the work and principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in more than 190 countries. National Societies act as auxiliaries to the public authorities of their own countries in the humanitarian field and provide a range of services including disaster relief, health and social programmes. During wartime, National Societies assist the affected civilian population and support the army medical services where appropriate.

## **The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement**

is guided by seven Fundamental Principles:

**humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity and universality.**

All Red Cross and Red Crescent activities have one central purpose:

**to help without discrimination those who suffer and thus contribute to peace in the world.**



TRUST?

BLOCK?

## Humanity in the age of distrust



**C**ries of 'fake news'. Abuse and scandal in government, business and civil society. Personal data sold to the highest bidder. Algorithms that manipulate what we see on social media. Online 'bots', troll factories, hate speech.

The list of trends helping to erode public trust goes on and on — no wonder that questions of trust and distrust have come to define our era and our everyday lives. Our phones and computers continually ask us to 'accept', 'trust', 'block' or 'deny' solicitations from unknown sources and, every day, we see evidence that trust — this critical glue that holds our societies together — is on increasingly shaky ground.

### Accept?

Don't take my word for it. The Edelman Trust Barometer, an annual global survey that tracks people's attitudes towards key societal institutions such as media, government, business and non-profit groups, shows that trust in those sectors has steadily declined in recent years, with a slight uptick in 2019. Only one in five people surveyed in the 2019 survey, which polled people in 27 markets worldwide, felt that overall, 'the system' was working for them.

This reality poses big challenges for institutions that sell products, provide information or try to make the world a better place. But distrust itself is not necessarily a bad thing. In places of conflict or insecurity, for example, distrust is often key to survival. Even in countries at peace, a healthy skepticism is often considered a virtue.

### Block?

Yet, as we've seen too often in recent years, distrust can also kill. If it leads people to avoid critical healthcare, or a vaccination, as has happened with the Ebola crisis (see story on page 4), the consequences of distrust can be devastating. Distrust can also lead to aid workers being rejected, threatened, arrested or even killed simply for trying to save or improve the lives of others.

These are a few of the reasons that trust is a key theme of the 33rd International Conference of the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement this December in Geneva, Switzerland. Just as much as tarpaulins, food and medicine, trust is an essential commodity of our work. If we hope to help people at their most vulnerable, we must ensure they trust that our intentions are only humanitarian and our emblem is not linked to any other objective. We also need those with power, particularly states and donors, to help us maintain that trust by respecting and enabling neutral, impartial and independent humanitarian response.

In many areas where we work today, however, extremely vulnerable people are being further marginalized by laws and policies that criminalize their plight and even render acts of kindness towards them illegal (see *Handcuffing the helpers*, page 8). At the same time, humanitarian organizations are being asked by major donors to participate in programmes with specific political aims (such as curbing migration). Both these trends could seri-

ously undermine the trust people have in us, potentially pushing them further from services that keep all our communities safer and healthier.

### Report?

We in the humanitarian sector are also taking a hard look at our own responsibilities. Following a series of scandals in recent years, organizations are taking steps to prevent fraud and abuse and to make our workforces and leadership ranks more inclusive. We are also working to improve coordination, provide better evidence of impact and develop better systems for listening and responding to people's concerns. Stories on all these themes can be found throughout this edition and on our website ([www.rcrcmagazine.org](http://www.rcrcmagazine.org)).

### Share!

I don't ask that you to 'trust' or 'accept' everything you read in these articles. But I do hope you consider, share and discuss some of the issues raised in the hope that we can all better understand this critical issue of trust and what it means to our shared humanity. Trust me: it's the only way we'll begin to solve today's complex challenges and ensure that 'trust' and 'accept' are always chosen over 'block' and 'deny' when lives and human dignity are at stake.

By **Malcolm Lucard**, editor, *Red Cross Red Crescent* magazine.

Photo: Yann le Flo'h/IFRC



*"Our role is to help whoever is in need. We go to the person who needs help most urgently, provide them with treatment and then we move on to the next person. We don't discriminate. We help everyone regardless of race, religion, political affiliation. We take pride in being there to help."*

## Trust in action p12

Saipaci Aponte, a Venezuelan Red Cross volunteer in Caracas who works in the first-aid team that provides help to people injured during civil disturbances. She also offers first-aid workshops and trains new volunteers in the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. See her story, and more about the work of volunteers in Venezuela, on page 12, and see video features about three Venezuelan Red Cross volunteers at our website: [www.rccmagazine.org](http://www.rccmagazine.org).

## Red Cross Red Crescent magazine online

As *Red Cross Red Crescent* magazine goes increasingly digital, more of our content is available first online. Visit our website, [www.rccmagazine.org](http://www.rccmagazine.org) or scan the QR code to the right to see more great stories on the themes of trust, climate change and many others.

### **Trust, block, accept? Aid in the age of distrust:**

Surveys in recent years show that trust in institutions is falling across nearly all sectors. The humanitarian sector is no exception. But what should aid groups do to rebuild trust?

### **What 'do no harm' means for humanitarians in the digital age:**

Some recent reports suggest that many humanitarian organizations are embracing new technologies to help people in need without paying enough attention to data protection. **Plus:** Virtual volunteers offer new insights into what trust means in the digital age.

**Trust from within:** With the humanitarian sector engaged in a number of long-term, complex emergencies, coordination is an important component of public trust. **Plus:** As military forces become increasingly involved in humanitarian support, how should aid organizations respond?

## New videos

**It's their planet too:** Young volunteers from Afghanistan share what climate change means to them as they help people caught between droughts, flash floods and conflict.

**They're cute:** But they are also key to survival for people in many parts of the Andes. See how Forecast-based Financing is helping alpaca herders in Peru stay ahead of a harsh climate.



### **Sign up and never miss out!**

Get on our email reading and viewing list by visiting [www.rccmagazine.org](http://www.rccmagazine.org) and clicking subscribe.

### **Want to use our content?**

National Societies that want to share these stories should contact magazine communications officer Irina Ruano at [Irina.Ruano@ifrc.org](mailto:Irina.Ruano@ifrc.org).

### **Stories from within**

You can also join the conversation behind these stories by joining the Facebook group *Red Cross Red Crescent Stories from Within*.



# Contents

2019 ISSUE · [www.rcrcmagazine.org](http://www.rcrcmagazine.org)

## ■ Cover story

### When trust means life or death 4

As is the case in many complex emergencies, the struggle to stop the spread of Ebola virus disease is not just about providing services such as information, vaccines and treatment. It's about gaining the trust of people who have good reason to be wary, so they fully engage in preventing the crisis from getting worse.

### Handcuffing the helpers, part 1 8

Building trust among people on the move — who have often been deemed illegal by the countries where they reside — is extremely challenging. Now new laws and sanction regimes are making even simple humanitarian gestures criminal.

### Handcuffing the helpers, part 2 10

Laws aimed at limiting support for groups considered as 'terrorist' are having unintended consequences on humanitarian aid — in the very places it's needed most.

### Trust in action 12

The daily dedication and principled humanitarian work of volunteers is a key reason the Venezuelan Red Cross has been able to help people on all sides of the political divide. See profiles of three young people who are helping others, even as they themselves face similar hardships.

## ■ Focus

### The journey of a lifetime 14

For decades, the border town of Cúcuta was a departure point for people escaping Colombia's

instability towards a new life in Venezuela.

In recent years, the situation has reversed as thousands of Venezuelans have headed into Colombia. With no money even for a bus ticket, most embark on a perilous high-altitude trek on foot across twisting mountain passes.

## ■ Climate crisis

### The unseen faces of climate change 18

The global climate change discourse is dominated by voices from relatively wealthy, developed countries. But what do people who suffer the brunt of the climate crisis think? We asked young volunteers around the world what climate change means to them as they strive to help people caught between droughts, flash floods and conflict.

### Life in the hotspot 20

The deadly mix of climate change and conflict has long plagued parts of the Sahel. Now, the emergence of climatic 'hotspots' — where temperatures are rising even more quickly than in surrounding areas — are testing the limits of resilience.

### A window of time 26

As storms and floods become more extreme and less predictable, weather forecasts trigger relief funding before disaster strikes, giving people time to prepare and potentially saving many more lives.

## ■ Resources 29

Publications and online products from around the Movement.

Articles, letters to the editors and other correspondence should be addressed to:

**Red Cross Red Crescent**

P.O. Box 303, CH-1211 Geneva 19, Switzerland

E-mail: [rcrcmagazine@ifrc.org](mailto:rcrcmagazine@ifrc.org) ISSN No. 1019-9349

#### Editor

Malcolm Lucard

#### Communications Officer

Irina Ruano

#### Design and layout

René Berzia, Carole Richard - Ink Drop Geneva

#### Printed

on chlorine-free paper by Gutenberg, Annecy, France.

We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of researchers and support staff of the ICRC, the IFRC and National Societies.

The magazine is published once a year in Arabic, English, French and Spanish and is available in 190 countries, with a circulation of more than 40,000.

The opinions expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. Unsolicited articles are welcomed, but cannot be returned.

Red Cross Red Crescent reserves the right to edit all articles. Articles and photos not covered by copyright may be reprinted without prior permission. Please credit Red Cross Red Crescent.

The maps in this publication are for information purposes only and have no political significance.

**On the cover:** IFRC's Diana Ongiti poses inside a protective suit used when treating people with Ebola virus disease. Photo: Yann le Flo'h/IFRC. Photos this page: Paulin Bashengezi/ICRC; illustration by Pierre Chassany/Comstone; Jhoander Sanchez/Venezuelan Red Cross; Erika Pineres/IFRC; Bruno Chavez, Peruvian Red Cross Society.



4. When trust means life or death



8. Handcuffing the helpers



12. Trust in action



14. The journey of a lifetime



26. A window of time

# When trust means life or death

Stopping Ebola virus disease is not just about providing information, vaccine and treatment. It's about gaining the trust of people with good reason to be wary.



Photo: Yann le Floch/IFRC



**L**ike many people in the city of Butembo, 25-year-old carpenter Machozi had not heard much about Ebola virus disease before November last year. Up to then, the epidemic had spared the city of roughly 1 million people in the north-eastern corner of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

He soon learned more than he ever wanted to know. After taking an infected person — one of the city's first cases — to a health clinic on his motorcycle, he was quickly identified as a 'contact', someone who was in close proximity to a person with Ebola.

Health workers tracked him down and asked him to come to the closest Ebola clinic for tests. As he waited for results, his dread increased. "I had heard many rumours about how those who left for the Ebola treatment centre died," he said later. "So I fled the centre and went back home."

Hiding in a small studio next to his family home, he began to feel the symptoms. Headache. Fever. Vomiting. Machozi's mother finally convinced him to return to the centre where he was ultimately cured.

As harrowing as it is, Machozi's story is not unusual. Amid the violence, political turmoil and insecurity of North Kivu province, a combination of fear, mistrust, rumours and some very hard truths — a majority of people infected with Ebola do not survive — have led many to resist treatment or other measures aimed at preventing the disease's spread.

"People are scared and they have very good reason to be," says Gwendolen Eamer, senior officer for public health in emergencies for the IFRC. "Ebola is a very scary disease."

In the meantime, the conflict that grips North Kivu — involving multiple armed groups, government forces and United Nations peacekeepers — continues to result in civilian deaths, both in cities such as Beni and Butembo and in remote rural villages.

"We live under one fear that adds to another," says Euloge, a nurse at a private health centre in Beni. "In the east you face machetes and in the west, where we were supposed to flee, now there's this disease."

The conflict has created a perfect storm for the spread of Ebola. The frequent attacks, often occurring directly in Ebola hotspots, result in sudden displacement of thousands of people. Meanwhile, the maps used by relief workers are marked with numerous 'red zones', places where medical and aid workers cannot go due to fighting. At various times since the outbreak began, major aid groups have suspended operations in North Kivu.

To navigate this fractious climate, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement (Movement) relies on four of its Fundamental Principles — neutrality, impartiality, humanity and independence — to assure people that it is there to help vulnerable people, not take sides in the fighting. For that reason, Movement personnel never travel with military or police protection, nor travel in or with United Nations or government aid convoys.

Just as importantly, the Movement has been at the forefront of efforts to develop better systems — put into action largely by National Society volunteers — to better listen to, track, analyze and respond to community needs and concerns (see story, page 7)

***"I had heard many rumours about how those who left for the Ebola treatment centre died. So I fled the centre and went back home."***

**Machozi**, a 25-year-old carpenter from Butembo, North Kivu, Democratic Republic of the Congo



25-year-old Machozi is back to work as a carpenter after surviving Ebola virus disease. Now he helps spread the word that Ebola is real and can be prevented and cured.

Photo: Paulin Bashengezi/ICRC

## Confronted by rumours

While many people in the communities torn by conflict and Ebola know and trust the Red Cross, due to its long-time presence providing a wide range of services, many others distrust anyone associated with the Ebola response. At the same time, a host of common rumours and beliefs have taken hold in many communities: Ebola is a scam invented by international non-governmental organizations to make money. The disease is the result of witchcraft. The Ebola vaccine contains poison. Health workers steal organs from the dead. Ebola isn't even real, it's just fake news.

This distrust has potentially fatal consequences. Some communities have rejected the help of volunteers who have come to bury deceased people — who remain highly infectious just after death — in a safe and dignified manner. Suspicion of aid workers has at times led to verbal abuse, threatening gestures, even violence against Red Cross workers.

Why such a level of distrust? In North Kivu, Ebola has taken hold where health and education systems are either weak or non-existent and where people have suffered horribly due to relentless violence without much notice from the outside world. Suddenly, at the arrival of Ebola, hundreds of international aid workers show up, filling the hotels and driving four-wheel-drive jeeps.

"People are asking 'Why are all these people here?'," says Eloisa Miranda, who coordinated the ICRC's ground operations in North Kivu until February 2019. "And, 'Why from one day to the next did everybody become interested in us when before this, there was no one — despite the fact that we had enormous needs?'"

At the same time, the response to Ebola can be incredibly scary. When someone is reported to have died from Ebola, family members are visited by safe and dignified burial teams made up of people covered head to toe in protective clothing. "You are coming into someone's home dressed in something that looks like a space suit — it is a very emotional thing," says Jamie LeSueur, who served as IFRC's head of Ebola response operation in the DRC for much of 2019.

As part of their work, the teams must disinfect the corpse, then put the deceased in a body bag and bury the body. This work is absolutely critical in the effort to stop Ebola, but if not done with sensitivity, people may reject it entirely. LeSueur says great pains are being taken to gain people's acceptance by allowing family or even community involvement and observation.

"We don't go into a community and take a body," he says. "We work with a community to make sure that they understand why we are there, what we are doing, why our teams are dressed that way and why we are doing this with the body of their loved one."

## Getting feedback

The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is also engaged in intensive community awareness-raising efforts. The Red Cross of the DRC, the ICRC and the IFRC have organized hundreds of community meetings and reached out to religious, youth and community leaders who can influence local opinion. Red Cross volunteers also go door-to-door (see sidebar, 'In their shoes,' page 7) to better understand people's concerns, reminding people about the Red Cross and showing them how to protect themselves from Ebola.

The bulk of the trust building falls on the shoulders of local volunteers of the Red Cross of the DRC who are known in their communities and understand local concerns and the trauma people in the area have been through.

"I got goosebumps when I first heard [of Ebola]," says Adeline, a Red Cross volunteer for 17 years who now leads the Red Cross's safe and dignified burial teams in Beni. "There are ten, five deaths at a time. That made me so scared because it reminded me of the massacres."

Others, like Deborah, are specifically trained in 'community engagement and accountability', in which volunteers gather information on people's concerns and raise awareness about Ebola by going door-to-door, organizing community education sessions, speaking on local radio shows or producing street theatre performances.

Knowledge and trust are critical, she says, because with Ebola, every second counts. "The virus is really dangerous and can be misleading as its symptoms mimic those of malaria, typhoid or cholera," Deborah says. "Ebola spreads because people who are infected don't seek treatment and some even go into hiding."

Given this level of mistrust, along with lack of access to areas of violence, even the emergence of vaccine and new treatments that have proven to be effective do not guarantee success.

This response may seem odd to some, but it makes perfect sense given that in many places in the DRC, the arrival of strangers in cars often spells danger. "Distrust is a survival mechanism," notes the IFRC's Eamer. "You listen to what people are saying and if something is happening, you drop everything and flee. It's a very rational behaviour. It has kept many people alive." ■

By Red Cross Red Crescent magazine staff.

With additional reporting by Fiston Mahamba, journalist based in Goma, DRC, and the ICRC delegation in Kinshasa, DRC.

***"Ebola spreads because people who are infected don't seek treatment and some even go into hiding."***

**Deborah**, a community engagement volunteer with the Red Cross of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

➔ Karungi Shamillah, 27, volunteers in her community in Majada, Uganda, close to the border with the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Shamillah has been trained to conduct community-based surveillance, educating communities about Ebola while also recognizing the signs of contamination.

Photo: Corrie Butler/IFRC



# In their shoes

## Building trust by listening, learning and responding to community concerns.

For more about new approaches to community engagement around the world, see 'Trust, a two-way street' at

[www.rcrcmagazine.org](http://www.rcrcmagazine.org)

While many of the attitudes swirling around Ebola virus disease (the disease is not real, for example) may be plainly false, they can take on an air of plausibility because another part of the rumour (humanitarians make money on disease) have some ring of truth.

"Most issues of distrust are based in someone's reality," notes the IFRC's Gwendolen Eamer. "There is some truth or it's based on some truth. You just have to take the time to imagine yourself in their shoes."

This is one reason why many humanitarian organizations are making concerted efforts to better understand, in reality, what it's like to be in the shoes of the people they are hoping to help. Often referred to as community engagement and accountability, these programmes aim at listening, tracking and responding to community perceptions and needs. They have become an increasingly integral part of Movement operations, from Cox's Bazar in Bangladesh to mobile migrant communities in South America.

With the Ebola crisis, the IFRC has taken this effort to a new level, introducing the first systematic, sector-wide mechanism for monitoring community perceptions and insights in an ongoing emergency.

"We are going community-to-community and often door-to-door with the message that Ebola is real and Ebola kills," says Cheick Abdoulaye Camara, a community engagement officer with the IFRC in DRC. "In the process, we are getting a lot of very useful information."

Entered in a spreadsheet by Red Cross volunteers, the data are then analysed by the United States Centers for Disease Control and shared on a protected, interactive online dashboard with other actors such as Médecins Sans Frontières, Oxfam, UNICEF and the World Health Organization.

Sometimes that data point to very practical needs, such as needing soap or washbasins, or can address more complex issues, such as people's questions about vaccinations. Why, for example, are some people getting vaccinations but not others? If these questions are not addressed, people may come up with their own explanations. For example, are vaccinations only for people with family or political connections?

"We can answer their questions and explain the strategy of immunizing health workers first and then the concept of ring vaccination and so build trust and engagement with the treatments," says Ombretta Baggio, senior adviser for community engagement for the IFRC, referring to the practice of creating a 'ring' of vaccinations around the sick person by first targeting anyone who has been in contact with an ill person, then those in proximity to the exposed contacts.

The data also help refine broader communications strategies, as well as prioritizing and coordinating messages. "It really impacts trust negatively if each outside actor comes with different information and messages," she notes. "It also erodes trust if the material aid or the messages do not respond to people's needs and concerns."

The next step is ensuring that the data also inform the way operations are carried out. "As trust builds, it creates a positive feedback loop, because then you get even more and better info, which leads to better response and even more trust," she says.

And humanitarian organizations also need to trust the communities they want to help. "Communities often have important suggestions but we are sometimes too busy to stop and hear what they are saying," says Baggio.



# Handcuffing the helpers

## Part 1

As migration is increasingly treated as a security matter rather than a humanitarian concern, migrants and those trying to help them are being regarded as criminals. Aid groups say the lives of migrants — and the trust needed to help them — are at stake.



**O**n the French–Italian border last year, a volunteer medical practitioner rescued a pregnant Nigerian woman struggling along a snowy Alpine path and took her to the nearest hospital. He was investigated by French police for assisting illegal entry.

And in the United States, a volunteer who provided food, water and shelter to migrants who crossed a deadly stretch of the Arizona desert is on trial.

Each case is different but represents a growing trend: while attempting to discourage migration, authorities are not just targeting migrants but also those offering them various types of humanitarian aid.

“At least 16 NGOs [non-governmental organizations] and associations have been affected by the formal criminalisation or investigation of their volunteers,” states a 2019 report by Research Social Platform on Migration and Asylum funded by the European Union (EU). The report found 49 ongoing cases of investigation and criminal prosecution across 11 EU countries involving 158 people.

“Independent judges have found no sound evidence for convictions in most of these cases,” notes a recent statement signed by 102 NGOs, including the European Union Red Cross Office in Brussels,

Belgium. “This suggests that prosecutions are often being politically used to deter solidarity and create a hostile environment for migrants.”

Proponents of these laws and prosecutions argue that they are necessary to stem what they see as an unsustainable influx of migrants. They often claim the actions of humanitarian organizations, including life-saving rescues, are encouraging more migrants to come.

Since 2015, search-and-rescue craft operated by various NGOs have rescued thousands of migrants but have increasingly found their vessels impounded and their staff arrested or accused of ‘colluding with smugglers’.

### Lives at stake

In the meantime, lives are being lost. From January to October 2019, more than 1,000 migrants have drowned crossing the Mediterranean Sea and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has warned that, unless search-and-rescue operations resume, refugee boat journeys will become more deadly.

The challenge, experts say, is that governments increasingly see migration as a security issue rather than a humanitarian concern. Authorities in many parts of the world are increasingly invoking security policies, anti-terrorism goals and anti-trafficking

***“Prosecutions are often being politically used to deter solidarity and create a hostile environment for migrants.”***

**Statement signed by 102 NGOs, including the European Union Red Cross Office in Brussels, Belgium.**



legislation to justify new criminal laws, as well as a range of new demands on humanitarian groups. One example are requests for personal data on migrants collected by humanitarian organizations as part of their work helping migrants.

"Some authorities think that because the Red Cross is implementing some activities linked to asylum reception, that they should have access to the data we hold on the people we are helping," says Anaïs Faure Atger, head of the migration unit at the Red Cross EU's office. "But this isn't how it works nor how it should work."

### A perilous path

Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies turn down such requests because compliance would jeopardize their efforts. After all, migrants are already navigating a perilous path full of people that they must rely on — even if they cannot all be trusted.

Consider the situation of Amer Al-Hussein, who left Idlib, Syria with his wife and their four children in early 2019. Fearing the sea, they attempted to walk across the Greek-Turkish land border with smugglers. They were supposed to meet a man on the other side. "But he didn't appear and we stayed there for five days," he told *Red Cross Red Crescent* magazine. "My youngest daughter was becoming dehydrated."

The family ultimately ended up at a transit centre on the border of Greece and North Macedonia to await the outcome of their asylum claim. "It's not easy to be in Syria," Al-Hussein says. "But the nights we spent in the woods [near the Greek-Turkish border] I was scared for my children. It was raining and we didn't have anything over our heads."

In this context, a familiar trusted emblem can save your life. "If I see the Red Cross or Crescent sign it gives me confidence that somebody will take care of me," he says. "They will at least provide water, food, clothes and medical aid."

### An anti-migrant atmosphere

For Red Cross National Societies in Europe, maintaining this trust means walking a clear, humanitarian line in a very tense political and legal atmosphere. In northern France, police carry out regular evictions of migrant camps, dispersing the inhabitants and making them harder for aid groups to access.

"The Red Cross is a very well-known emblem and symbol of protection and so we must ensure that it is not associated with police actions," says Florent Clouet, who coordinates migration response for the French Red Cross. "But even more importantly, we need to continually show that we are there for everyone. We treat all communities in the same manner."

Questions about the impartiality of aid are playing out on other fronts as various forms of humanitarian and development funding (the European Union Trust Fund for Africa, for example) are largely linked to migration-management strategies that aim to prevent population movement towards Europe. Organizations that accept such funding in order to do important work could be seen as implementers of an anti-migrant agenda.

"It is critical to underline that our reason for engaging in a given humanitarian project is because there are needs, identified through a thorough needs assessment, not because of a political agenda," Atger adds.

As humanitarian organizations navigate these new challenges, fundamental elements of treaty law (such as refugee law and the Law of the Sea, which requires ships to save vessels in distress) are being lost. Humanitarian NGOs argue that states must both respect their treaty obligations and carefully revise anti-trafficking laws in order to make clear distinctions between smuggling and acts of humanity.

"People are taking dangerous routes and enormous risks because there are no legal options for them to reach the EU and seek protection," says Atger. "We have to start treating the question of migration as a humanitarian, not a criminal, concern." ■

By **Andrew Connelly.**

Andrew Connelly is a freelance journalist based in the United Kingdom.



***"If I see the Red Cross or Crescent sign it gives me confidence that somebody will take care of me."***

**Amer Al-Hussein**, who left Idlib, Syria with his wife and their four children in early 2019

Photo: Victor Lacken/IFRC

**TRUST ON THE TRAIL**  
See our online video, photo and text series about the fragile nature of trust on the migration trail at [www.rccrmagazine.org](http://www.rccrmagazine.org)

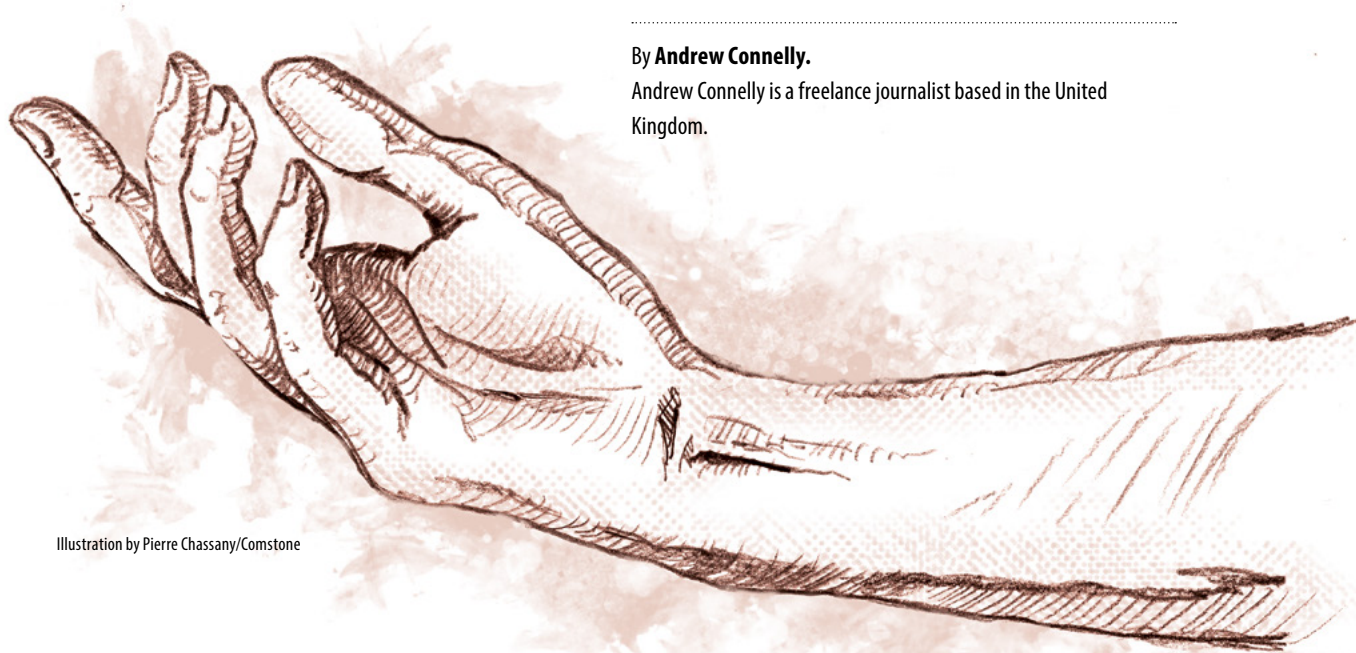


Illustration by Pierre Chassany/Comstone

# Part 2 Handcuffing the helpers

Laws aimed at limiting support for groups considered as ‘terrorist’ are having unintended consequences on humanitarian aid — in the very places it’s needed most.

**“On the one hand, states are funding our work and, on the other hand, they are often inadvertently criminalizing the exact activity that they asked us to carry out under the Geneva Conventions.”**

Tristan Ferraro, legal adviser for the ICRC

In places where humanitarian activities are most desperately needed — often complex battle zones with multiple armed groups — humanitarian organizations must manage a dizzying array of roadblocks and even life-threatening challenges in order to get help to people caught up in conflict.

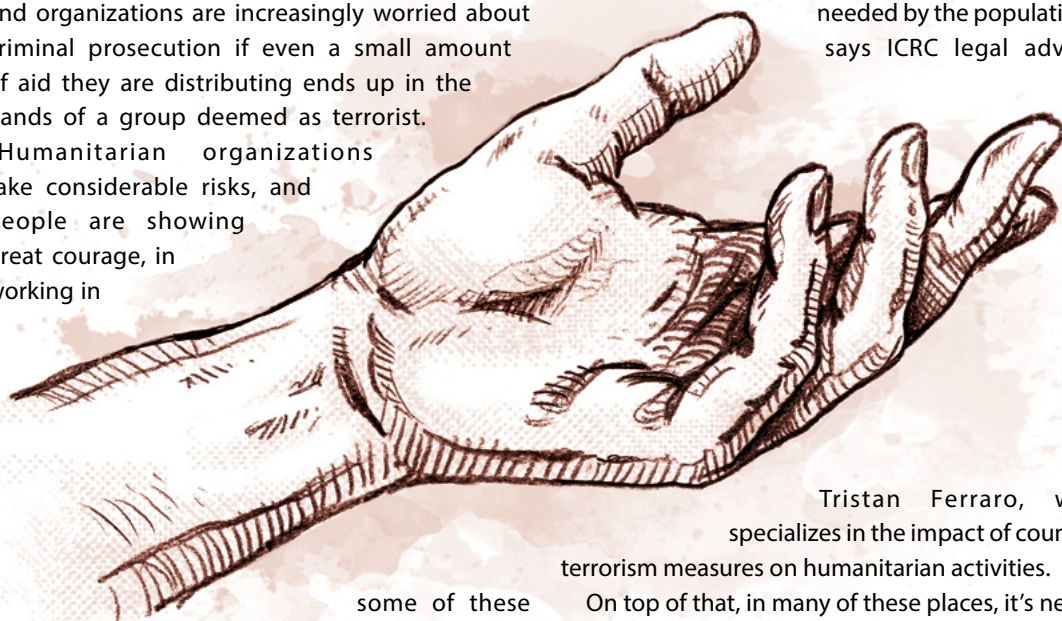
Increasingly, however, humanitarians are facing new restrictions. These barriers aren’t due to dynamics on the battleground.

While proponents of these measures argue that the restrictions reduce the human suffering caused by such groups, they are putting aid organizations in a difficult bind. Already facing multiple dangers on the ground, relief workers and organizations are increasingly worried about criminal prosecution if even a small amount of aid they are distributing ends up in the hands of a group deemed as terrorist.

“Humanitarian organizations take considerable risks, and people are showing great courage, in working in

Such laws are not new. Most originated in the years following the attacks on the World Trade Center in the United States in 2001 as a part of a broader strategy aimed at cutting off financing for terrorist networks. But as counter-terrorism laws and policies were adopted by more countries — among them, some of the top humanitarian donor countries — aid groups have seen a wider range of impacts.

The greatest challenges are in places such as Gaza, Iraq, Mali, Nigeria, Syria and Yemen, where groups considered as extremist or terrorist are operating. “The problem is that the places where the laws hinder humanitarian aid are exactly the places where our activities are most needed by the population,” says ICRC legal adviser



some of these places,” says Jacob Kurtzer, deputy director of the Humanitarian Agenda Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in Washington DC. “Increasingly, humanitarian organizations are not only taking on physical risks but also significant legal risks.”

Kurtzer’s recent report, *Denial, Delay, Diversion: Tackling Access Challenges in an Evolving Humanitarian Landscape*, outlines a wide range of ways in which aid is being blocked at the very time that humanitarian needs are soaring. Counter-terrorism laws and measures, he says, are part of that mix: slowing down aid, raising costs, blocking supplies and, in some cases, forcing aid groups to stop operations or even defend their workers from prosecution.

Tristan Ferraro, who specializes in the impact of counter-terrorism measures on humanitarian activities.

On top of that, in many of these places, it’s nearly impossible to guarantee an absolutely airtight aid delivery, says Gareth Price-Jones, executive secretary of the Steering Committee for Humanitarian Response (SCHR), a forum for aid policy discussions that includes nine member organizations, including the IFRC and ICRC.

Even as international aid organizations have greatly improved their assessment and accountability systems in recent years, no system is foolproof, he says. “In places such as Syria, for example, where there are multiple armed groups considered by several governments as terrorist, it’s extremely difficult to guarantee that absolutely no aid could be diverted in some way,” Price-Jones says.

“Some organizations therefore are no longer operating in certain areas or they are refusing to





accept money from certain donor states,” says Price-Jones, who also serves as Senior Humanitarian Policy and Advocacy Coordinator at CARE International.

That said, most experts do not dispute that intentional aid diversion by questionable charities is a real problem. But if something isn’t done to balance humanitarian concerns versus security issues, aid groups will have to restrict their work to legally ‘safe’ areas — thereby jeopardizing the impartiality of their work, the notion that aid is delivered based solely on need. That, in turn, could erode the trust people in conflict areas have in aid organizations — which for aid workers in battle zones can be a life-and-death issue.

Another key area of concern is the insertion of counter-terrorism clauses in aid funding agreements that place tight conditions how the funds can be used. Often, they also impose heavy reporting requirements.

Economic sanctions and embargoes also require aid groups to navigate byzantine processes and get approval from multiple agencies before importing desperately needed goods or currencies.

Meanwhile, aid groups say banks often refuse to process money transfers to countries where extremist groups operate (or which are under sanctions) for fear the transactions could breach the growing number of legal restrictions.

### A humanitarian exemption

One potential response is something called a ‘standing humanitarian exemptions’ in which aid groups that follow principles of neutrality, independence and impartiality and act in a manner consistent with the Geneva Conventions can operate largely outside the counter-terror framework. A new European Union directive on combating terrorism, for example, includes a humanitarian exemption of this nature.

In the case of funding restrictions in grant agreements, organizations generally negotiate caveats on a case-by-case basis. As an established organization with an international reach, Ferraro says the ICRC has

generally been successful in negotiating terms that don’t violate the organization’s principles.

For smaller non-governmental organizations with less negotiating power, less developed reporting mechanisms and smaller legal teams, it’s a much bigger challenge. Those smaller organizations are a critical part of the aid ecosystem, offering a wide range of specific and highly important community services. Large aid groups, therefore, must also make a strong case for all legitimate aid groups that qualify.

A big part of the task ahead involves making political actors more aware of the on-the-ground challenges involved in humanitarian work, of the negative impact of counter terrorism measures, as well as the other legal and moral obligations states have in facilitating humanitarian relief.

Under the Geneva Conventions, belligerents are obliged to ensure the basic life and dignity of civilian populations under their control. Where they are unable to do so, they must allow and facilitate the delivery of impartial humanitarian aid. The counter-terrorism frameworks, however, have largely been developed through a ‘security prism’ with insufficient consideration of humanitarian or even other national security and foreign policy considerations.

“So there is a paradoxical approach where, on the one hand, states are funding our work and, on the other hand, they are — often inadvertently — criminalizing the exact activity that they asked us to carry out under the Geneva Conventions,” notes Ferraro.

The task ahead, says Kurtzer, is to raise awareness about the unintended consequences of these laws, given the complexity of today’s armed conflicts. “Instead of prioritizing their intellectual energy on developing the best response to the most urgent needs in highly complex settings, humanitarian organizations must spend a lot of intellectual energy on determining if and how the organization is in compliance with the regulations,” says Kurtzer. “I don’t believe that is what the donors want.” ■

---

By **Malcolm Lucard.**

Malcolm Lucard is editor of *Red Cross Red Crescent* magazine.

***“Increasingly, humanitarian organizations are not only taking on physical risks but also significant legal risks.”***

**Jacob Kurtzer**, deputy director of the Humanitarian Agenda Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in Washington DC

Illustration by Pierre Chassany/Comstone



# Trust in action

**The daily dedication of volunteers is a key reason the Venezuelan Red Cross has been able to help people on all sides of the political divide.**

🔊 Volunteer Saipaci Aponte visits an apartment complex where elderly people live without younger relatives, many of whom have left due to economic pressures.

Photo: Manuel Rueda/IFRC

In the courtyard of a Venezuelan Red Cross branch in Caracas, Saipaci Aponte shares with new volunteers some of the first-aid skills she's learned through her own training — and some of the lessons she's learned on the streets as a rescue worker and as part of the first-aid team that helps people during civil disturbances.

"Is the patient conscious?" she asks two young volunteers, who are tasked with assessing the condition of another volunteer, playing the role of someone with severe stomach injuries.

"She is unconscious," one of them replies.

Aponte follows up: "Did you put a bandage on her?"

This is not just a training session about bandages and first-aid procedure, however. It's about a lot of other things the volunteers need to know. "Our role is to help whoever is in need," Aponte says. "We go to the person who needs help most urgently. We provide them with treatment and then we move on to the next person. We don't discriminate."

"We help everyone regardless of race, religion, political affiliation. We take pride in being there to help."

On-the-scene triage — at a road crash, natural calamity or large public gatherings — is never simple. During Venezuela's recent unrest, volunteers have also had to rigorously reflect Fundamental Principles such as humanity and impartiality. This daily dedication to their work, and these principles, is one reason the National Society has been able to maintain the trust and become the main provider of humanitarian assistance in Venezuela.

Later the same day, Aponte reinforces this message as she leads a discussion among new volunteers on the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement's principles of impartiality and neutrality. "Let's say we have a conflict between two sides," she tells the group. "There are injured on both sides. What do I do? I will help both sides, because we are neutral. It doesn't matter who I sympathize with. We work with both sides."

## Time and dedication

More than words, volunteers like Aponte lead by example. They show not only how people can do great things but also that they are just normal individuals with hopes and dreams like any other person.

Aponte, for example, is studying to become a nurse at the Venezuelan Red Cross nursing academy. "It takes time and dedication to study," she says.

See video profiles of each of these volunteers at

[www.rcrcmagazine.org](http://www.rcrcmagazine.org)







"Just like with my rescue work. I go to university in the mornings, from 07:30 to 12:30. After I've finished classes, I go to the rescue team, where there is always something to do."

She also often stops by an apartment building that is home to many elderly people whose children have left the country due to economic hard times. Here, Saipaci and other Red Cross volunteers provide psychosocial support. "I've been a volunteer for almost four years," she says. "It's been challenging, but it also has its rewards. Volunteering has helped me meet new people, people with different ideas. And you help people without receiving anything in return. Except a smile or a gesture of gratitude. And that's very nice."

When she's not helping others, she is like most other young people. "When I'm not at the Red Cross or at nursing school, I'm at home. I watch movies on my computer. I may do my homework or some research. Or I go to my mother's place or spend time with my sister, Ligia."

"I'd like to keep on studying. And move on to other careers like working in tourism or being a flight attendant. I'd like to get to know Venezuela and also visit other countries, like Colombia, France or Germany. Or Curaçao [a Caribbean island], I'd really like to go to Curaçao."

Wherever Aponte's path leads, she will certainly go far. And she will no doubt be helping others along the way. "We want to continue to improve," she says of her work at the Red Cross. "We want to keep on helping and serving the Venezuelan people, so that their quality of life improves even in a small way." ■

Reporting by **Manuel Rueda**.

Manuel Rueda is a journalist based in Bogota, Colombia



### 📍 Giving something back

A 30-year-old medical doctor, Luis Lamus had to abandon his private practice in Caracas due to the constant power outages. So now, to make a living, he makes house calls. But he also goes out into communities as a volunteer to provide free health check-ups, supply medicines whenever possible and help people cope with preventable diseases. Once a week, he volunteers at the Red Cross hospital in Caracas, where he does free follow-up consultations. "We go out to both urban and rural communities. Sometimes we'll have 50 to 60 patients to see in one morning, while at other times the number of patients may reach 100 or even 150," he says, adding that he sees people with everything from high-blood pressure to severe skin rashes and diarrhoea due to poor water quality. "I trained for three years in the Red Cross, so this is my way of giving something back."



### 📍 Helpers who don't let hard times stop them

In the port city of Maracaibo, in western Venezuela, Zuleidy Medina prepares for another day helping others, even as she deals with many of the same hardships as those she works to assist. "When there is electricity, I'll wake up at 06:30, brush my teeth, take a shower and head out," says Medina, a nurse and teacher by training. "When there is no electricity I wake up at 03:00 because the fan doesn't work and it gets too hot. There are too many flies and you can't sleep." Often, there is no shower either. "If there is no power, there is no way to pump water." One day recently, Medina headed to an indigenous community outside of the city to give an earthquake evacuation drill for schoolchildren. Along the way, she stopped at three supermarkets to buy food as the school has very little to feed the children. The first two shops were closed due to food shortages and electricity cuts. "We are all going through hard times," she says. "But there are people in even more vulnerable conditions and we can do something to help them."

Photos: Jhoander Sanchez/Venezuelan Red Cross

# The journey of a lifetime

For decades, the border town of Cúcuta was a departure point for people escaping Colombia's instability towards a new life in Venezuela, their eastern neighbour. Now the situation has reversed as thousands of migrants cross the border from Venezuela to Colombia each month, many carrying their last possessions on their back. With no money even for a bus ticket, most are forced to embark on a perilous high-altitude trek on foot for days, crossing twisting mountain passes and sleeping under the stars in bitterly cold temperatures before reaching the city of Bucaramanga and later Colombia's capital, Bogotá, or even Ecuador or Peru. We start with the story of Juan who walked more than 500 kilometres, across mountain passes, sleeping on floors and roadsides — all with his 2-year-old son Santiago at his side.

Photos: **Erika Pineros/IFRC**. Words: **Andrew Connelly**

📍 ➡ With his son Santiago at his side, Juan arrived in Colombia in late October and immediately began looking for any kind of menial task to survive. After the searing heat of Cúcuta, the pair walked kilometres along zigzagging roads, through the cold, rainy town of Pamplona, across sheer mountain passes and through lush green valleys before being given a ride across the freezing Páramo de Berlin — the most challenging section of the road to Bucaramanga.

"I picked up aluminium cans on the streets of Cúcuta to sell for recycling for a few days to get some money, and I had to bring Santiago along with me as there was nowhere else to put him," says Juan. "With this money I managed to rent a room sharing with three other people."





"Back in Valencia, I was a bus driver but, in the end, what [money] I was making just wasn't enough," says Juan. "I didn't own the bus and when it broke down, it sometimes took a week or more to get repaired as there is a scarcity of parts. During that time, I wouldn't be paid and those periods became progressively longer."



"We were travelling in a group for safety, but it's difficult — people have different speeds and sometimes not everyone gets a ride, which splits the group up. Luckily, we got a ride across the Páramo. I heard that people die up there from the cold."

"At one point, a truck pulled up and the driver said they would only take women and children, so I handed Santiago to a woman and we met up later. After, I became a bit nervous. You hear rumours about children getting kidnapped here, but in the end he was safe. He asks for his mother a lot; he hasn't seen her for two months."

"Now, despite these adverse conditions, I'm still happy we can spend some time together," says Juan. "For Santiago it's a big adventure, he even started to learn how to ask for rides on the road. He was my reason for leaving and my motivation to continue."



➡ “I sold my phone back in Venezuela just before I left, which gave me money for a day or two. When I arrived in Colombia, I sold my hair,” says 18-year-old Yusmil, who came to Colombia with her brother. The two joined a larger group for security. Yusmil sheepishly explains that she has already spent the last of the money she got from selling most of her hair to a barber in Cúcuta. She made the little she has left into a braid. “The hairdressers gave me 30,000 pesos [US\$ 9] and I have spent it already on rent and food,” she says. “We don’t know where we’ll sleep tonight, we’ll keep on walking until we can’t walk any more.”



➡ By the tollbooth on the main road stretching out of Cúcuta, the sunlight glints off the yellow and green handbags dangling from the neck and arms of Jesús and Gabriela Campos. But these are no ordinary handbags. Rather than being made of leather, the raw material for these colourful and sturdy bags is the bank notes from their native Venezuela. Due to hyperinflation and government devaluations, the small amount of money that Jesús and Gabriela brought to Colombia could not buy anything, so they decided to convert it into a tradable product. “We take the old bills and turn them into bags, wallets, chequebook holders and purses,” Gabriela explains over the rumble of passing cars and trucks.





📍 Bianca Rodriguez's son Alejandro is the last patient of the day to be checked by exhausted doctors at a Colombian Red Cross Society medical station near the Simón Bolívar bridge in Cúcuta. After that, the mother and son will make the long journey back to their hometown of San Cristobal, Venezuela. Every week, Bianca takes her children over the border to receive healthcare and medicine that is unavailable back home. "My son Alejandro is just ten months old and today he has a fever. He suffers constantly from allergies that block his bronchi and that leads to respiratory infections."

"There are no paediatricians in my town, so I need to travel to Colombia every week. There are no antibiotics and the shortage of doctors is such that they only attend emergencies."

📍 Behind Bogotá's main bus terminal, an informal tented settlement in the woods has spilled over onto nearby roads. Hundreds of migrants have constructed improvised shelters from scavenged materials and line them precariously alongside the roadside. The encampments are divided by train tracks so, occasionally, a one-carriage locomotive chugs through, interrupting people gathered around small campfires. "Back home I worked as gardener and cleaned swimming pools," says Brihan, one of the camp's temporary residents. "I never thought I would be in this kind of situation and my children would have to see this, but there's no alternative."





# The unseen of

In general, the global discussion about climate change is dominated by voices in wealthier, developed countries, where access to media is widespread. But what do people who suffer the brunt of climate change think about this foremost issue of our times? We asked volunteers around the world what climate change means to them as they strive to help people caught between droughts, flash floods and violence.



## Sadiq Sediqi

Student of economics at Herat University and volunteer in the Afghan Red Crescent Society's youth section. Herat, Afghanistan

"Climate change has impacted many countries around the world. The most evident sign is global warming. Those who work in the climate change field say that the globe has become warmer by one degree Celsius, compared to previous years. Now, in Afghanistan, the usual rhythm of rain, snow and hail has been interrupted.

In Herat, for example, farmers tell us that climate change has shuffled the weather pattern. During the period when it used

to rain, it doesn't rain any more. Then, some time later, the rains arrive, but they are much stronger and cause flooding, which damages the fields used for agriculture. So unfortunately, there is a very visible shortage of agricultural products in Herat.

In Herat province, we also have about 30,000 people who have been displaced from neighbouring provinces. Most have been displaced due to insecurity or climate change. Those who have been displaced because of climate change have suffered from either floods or drought and so they had to flee their home villages.

Those who are in camps for displaced people are in a dire situation. They don't have drinking water. They don't have shelters or food or washrooms. They're far from schools and hospitals or clinics.

At the same time, in the west of Afghanistan, there is also a shortage of drinking water. A survey illustrated how in the next 20 years, the water level will go down by 40 metres. That is a very big concern. Another problem is that because there is no standard system for waste water, polluted water sometimes mixes with the water needed for drinking.

The lack of water also causes crops to fail, which leads to a shortage of food. Land that cannot be harvested on a regular basis becomes unproductive. That makes people leave their lands and come to the city. But when they come here, we don't have enough capacity to host them. Because of the climate conditions, there is not enough water. Plus, there are no jobs. So when people come to the city, they cannot find work and are therefore vulnerable financially, which can lead to insecurity.

But there are things we can do to make a difference. For example, along with some other volunteers, I want to have seminars and educate people in climate change. We want to give people six or seven ways to prevent climate change. This way, people can, bit by bit, decrease its impact in the future."



# faces climate change

Photos by Kiana Hayeri/IFRC

See more climate crisis stories and share your own by joining the campaign at [#FacesOfClimateChange](#)



## Asma Kurnia

Indonesian Red Cross Society volunteer

"People sometimes don't realize that what they do has an impact, positive and negative," says Asma Kurnia, a volunteer for the Indonesia Red Cross (pictured above). "It's okay for developing the country, but the negative side is that sometimes it injures the earth." Kurnia is one of many volunteers from around the world stepping forward to take part in the IFRC's Faces of Climate Change campaign, which challenges people to volunteer to take action on climate change. As a first step, they posted short videos about how the climate crisis is impacting their lives.



## Esther Muiriri

Kenya Red Cross Society volunteer

"We are experiencing long months of dry season with extremely hot weather and also a lot of rainfall [and] impacts like floods," says Esther Muiriri, a volunteer with the Kenya Red Cross Society (pictured above). "We are also experiencing crop failures, which have contributed to food insecurity and loss of livelihoods. One area in the Rift Valley was affected by army worms, which were never found in Kenya before. They cleared the fields of crops and that was catastrophic for us."



# Life in the hotspot

The deadly mix of climate change and conflict has long plagued parts of the Sahel. Now, the emergence of climatic hotspots — where temperatures are rising even more quickly than in surrounding areas — are testing the limits of resilience.

By **Malcolm Lucard**, with reporting by **Khadija Maiga** in Mali and Niger.  
Some of the names of key sources in this article have been changed or abbreviated to protect their identity.





***“The last five years have been hard. We have land but it’s been three years since the rain allowed us to be profitable here.”***

**Ramatou, 22, from Tillabéri in western Niger**

**K**inassar, aged 24, manages a small herd of cattle that he moves from place to place near the town of Abala in western Niger in search of grazing land and water. “I walk the cattle and my wife sells livestock products, such as milk and cheese,” he says.

Like many people eking out a living here, Kinassar’s means of survival is being threatened by numerous factors — conflict, a changing climate, population growth — that limit where and when he can feed his cattle.

“There is less and less space available,” he says. “The people are more and more numerous and there is less and less space. Also, we cannot go through certain areas due to insecurity. It is more and more difficult to find quality pastures. It’s making my livestock ill.”

Like many people in western Niger, Kinassar is a good example of the resilience and adaptation people have shown in the face of incredible challenges. Thousands of people here still make a living moving livestock and raising crops in ways that date back centuries, despite diminishing aquifers, reduced grazing and farming land, extreme tem-

peratures, sustained droughts, sudden floods and a conflict that involves multiple armed actors representing many countries and some of the world’s most advanced weapons systems.

This resilience has many faces. In the region of Tillabéri, also in western Niger, 22-year-old Ramatou is one of many women struggling alone to manage her small market garden; her husband left to find a job after the harvests became too small to support the family. “The last five years have been hard,” she says. “We have land but it’s been three years since the rain allowed us to be profitable here.”

All these factors are also forcing many people to find new ways to make a living or better their standing. In the Malian city of Mopti, 21-year-old Gouro sold his herd of livestock so he could open a small kiosk and sell mobile phones. “A year ago, we decided to go to Mopti to flee the insecurity,” he says, adding that the move allowed him to go to school and get his diploma while feeding his mother and two brothers. “When we left [our village of] Dialloubé, I sold all my cattle and became a mobile phone merchant. It’s lucrative and helped us a lot.”



Kinassar, 24, cowherd in Toukounous, in western Niger, with his herd of cattle.

Photo: Leonard Pongo/Noor/ICRC



# Sahel's hotspots explained

For centuries, people of the Sahel have survived in this challenging landscape by paying close attention to seasonal weather patterns, knowing when and where to find scarce vegetation and water for livestock or planting crops to best profit from the monsoon rains. But climate change is disrupting traditional monsoon patterns. Now the rainy season (normally from June to October) has become shorter, with unpredictable bouts of heavy rains.

While much recent evidence indicates still drier times will continue or worsen, climate scientists suggest it's not so simple. The unusually complex weather dynamics between the Atlantic Ocean to the west and the Mediterranean and hot desert landscapes to the north make climate prediction more uncertain than in other regions, according to numerous scientific papers.

That the Sahel will warm faster than the global average is not disputed. But some climate models predict that warming will lead to greener, wetter times ahead for the Sahel overall. After all, rainfall increased until 2009 after decades of low precipitation. Others forecast the opposite, noting that the catastrophic droughts in the last half century — with one of the most severe hitting the region as recently as 2015 — are a hint of worse things to come.

Nonetheless, there is general agreement that — wetter or drier — global warming will lead to several hotspots across the Sahel where temperature rises and aridification will be particularly severe. One of those hotspots is the zone between Chad, northern Mali and western Niger, where the nexus between conflict and an unpredictable climate is particularly pronounced.

It's a double-edged sword: as instability and conflict make it harder for people to deal with climate change, so rising temperatures, reduced water supplies and unpredictable weather make it much harder for people to cope with the vagaries of war (see 'Climate of war', *Red Cross Red Crescent* magazine, Issue 2, 2018).

## *"We sleep with one eye open."*

**Ramatou H.**, 18, from Abala in western Niger. In this area, near to where conflict rages, most of the men have left to find work as croplands dry up.

## **Pulled into conflict by climate changes**

For others, dramatic changes in local climate patterns drew them further into the conflict. "In my village of Temera, I was a cart hauler for merchants during the River Niger's high-water period," says 16-year-old Mamadou.

"My village was essentially an island during these periods; vehicles could not get there. The merchants' products could only arrive by fishing boats, or *pinasses*, as we call them. So we profited from the changes in the weather to get some work. I also got busy unloading the *pinasses* and taking the goods by mule to the merchants."

In recent years, high-water periods have become shorter as the rains dwindled. "I had to come up with other livelihoods," he says. "My enrolment in an armed group didn't happen immediately. Seeing that I was a cart puller, the armed groups often asked me to look for water.

"With time, I became involved. It became a regular source of income. After a while, they trusted me with a firearm and taught me how to use it. I was 14 years old. From then on, I was given the task of security and I worked at a checkpoint. This helped me make some money."

Mamadou's story is relatively common here. Many young men are drawn into armed groups out of desperation exacerbated by climate change. While most international security experts say that climate change is not a main driver of conflict in the Sahel, it is playing an important role in heightening tensions over precious land and water resources and increasing the pressure on young men with fewer and fewer options. These factors are often exploited by armed groups, who see control of resources as critical to their survival.

Women also face particular challenges. Some small towns, such as Abala, are mainly populated by women because as croplands dry up, many men leave home to find work. Ramatou H., aged 18, is one of those left behind.

"My family has some land, which we cultivate," she says. "But this is not a livelihood because [the harvest] is just one time per year. So [my husband] leaves and then comes back during the sowing season."

📍 Drought, desertification and deforestation have taken a toll on a landscape that was once far more green. Here, a panoramic view of the valley behind Kandadji market in the town of Tillabéri, in western Niger.

Photos: Leonard Pongo/Noor/ICRC







Many in the village feel vulnerable. “We don’t feel secure anymore. We sleep with one eye open,” says Ramatou H.

Sometimes hunger overtakes their fear. “When there’s nothing [on the farm to harvest and eat], I go into the bush and harvest leaves, which can be cooked,” she says, adding that while the bush is dangerous, they go because if they don’t, “then we will have nothing to eat”.

### A climate of paradox and extremes

Due to the specific challenges of climate prediction in the region (see ‘Sahel’s hotspots explained’ at left), scientists and meteorological organizations struggle to make better and more accurate predictions for farmers, agencies that manage water and emergency response organizations who must simultaneously respond to drought, flash floods and a host of consequences caused by violence and conflict.

In 2018, for example, heavy rains across a wide swathe of south-eastern Niger caused massive flooding in an area already coping with displacement of thousands of people fleeing violence in northern Nigeria and where health and sanitation systems are non-existent or severely stretched.

One result: a cholera outbreak that infected more

than 3,800 people and claimed 78 lives. In response, the IFRC’s Disaster Relief Emergency Fund allocated 352,000 Swiss francs to help the Red Cross Society of Niger and other Movement partners stem the outbreak.

And in northern Mali, heavy rainfall in August 2018, washed away more than 840 homes, wiping out food stocks, livestock herds and farmlands, according to the Mali Red Cross, which did the initial assessment and provided shelter kits, household items and ultimately cash distributions (with support from IFRC emergency funds, ICRC pre-positioned stocks and contributions from seven National Societies).

While no single flood or dry spell is caused exclusively by climate change, the intensity of these weather events is one outcome. And it sets in motion other worrisome patterns. As desertification spreads, for example, surface soils absorb less water, making it more likely that when heavy rains fall, the rainwater spills off into quickly formed, fast-running streams rather than soak into aquifers.

This is one reason that in other parts of Mali, underground water is harder and harder to find.

People in the Sahel rely on livestock in many ways. Left and centre, 38-year-old Alima Amadou, from Toukounous, Niger, makes a traditional cheese made from cow’s milk. Climate change is putting pressure on traditional livelihoods, even pushing some young men (like the one pictured above, right) to join armed groups that offer some income.

*“After a while, they trusted me with a firearm and taught me how to use it. I was 14 years old.”*

**Mamadou**, aged 16, who joined an armed group after changes in the climate took away his ability to work doing river transport







"Climate change is having a real effect in Mali," says Rasha Abuelhassan, a water and habitat coordinator who until recently worked for the ICRC in Mali. "It's getting worse and worse every year. Particularly in north Mali, the water table is getting deeper and deeper."

"We have a lot of boreholes [deep wells] that are going dry and in more and more of our attempts at making boreholes we find no water."

In the northern Malian city of Kidal, which was never dry before, the ICRC had to dig new boreholes and then still needed to bring in water trucks until rainy season started, she adds.

Meanwhile, chronic insecurity complicates efforts to find solutions. "We have to go deeper to find an aquifer but with the security situation, we cannot find many contractors willing to send their [well-drilling] machines to a conflict area," says Abuelhassan.

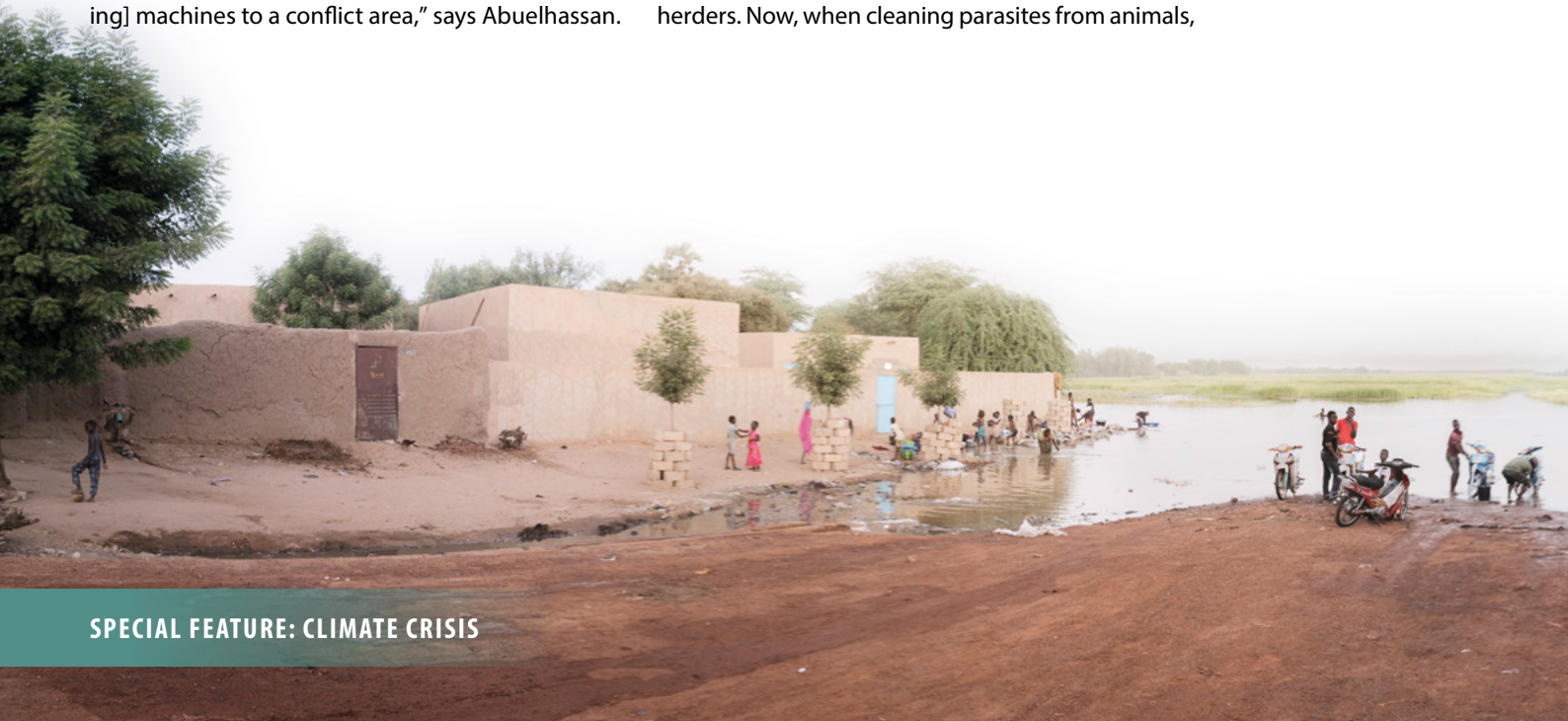
#### **Low-tech, holistic solutions**

Faced with these complexities, simply digging new wells is not a solution. More must be done with the limited water supplies available. One answer is relatively low tech: building or refurbishing 'micro dams' that create small ponds along creek beds during flash floods. The dams slow the water down, allowing it to sink into the ground and replenish aquifers. The ICRC has built four such micro dams in northern Mali and, as a result, nearby wells did not go dry last year, says Abuelhassan.

It's also about conserving water and making sure the water available does not get polluted, another critical issue across the Sahel. Even simple steps can make a difference. The ICRC has for many years provided vaccinations and delousing services for cattle herders. Now, when cleaning parasites from animals,

*"We have a lot of boreholes [deep wells] that are going dry and, in more and more of our attempts at making boreholes, we find no water."*

**Rasha Abuelhassan**, water and habitat coordinator for the ICRC in Mali





they use less water-intensive methods (spray application instead of baths) that also ensure chemicals used in the process do not sink into groundwater. Given that the ICRC vaccinated and treated a total of 4.7 million animals in Mali and Niger in 2018, such steps are not insignificant.

Climate change in the Sahel is about far more than water scarcity: it affects all aspects of life, from health and nutrition to personal safety and the viability of local economies. These hardships, therefore, require a holistic approach, experts say.

IFRC's ongoing complex emergency appeal for Niger, for example, combines a broad emergency and longer-term response, including initiatives on health, water provision, sanitation, food security, protection of women from gender-based violence, inclusion and community engagement and accountability, among other things. The appeal also calls for investing in the Niger Red Cross's capacity to manage these efforts over the longer term.

The head of ICRC's economic security unit, Charlotte Bennborn, agrees that the response must be holistic in order to help communities become more resilient to future shocks. In addition to helping people move to drought-resistant crops and water-saving farming techniques, it's important to think about other aspects of the food-production chain, such as how grains, seeds or meat are processed, transported and stored so there is no loss due to contamination, mould or rot.

One example of this approach is playing out near Tillabéri. Along with millet, the ICRC provided nine new grain storage facilities and trained people how to manage them. It is also supporting market gardens, building and equipping butcher shops and training veterinary assistants.

### Diversification of livelihoods

In one project near Timbuktu, Mali, ICRC's Abuelhasan oversaw the building of perimeter fences around a peanut garden managed by a local women's association. The fences protect the peanuts from

damage by livestock while the peanuts will be ultimately made into peanut butter for vendors in Mali's capital, Bamako.

Part of the strategy is to help people maintain traditional livelihoods while also diversifying their options, for example, helping them to start small businesses with micro-loans or grants so that local communities can better withstand shocks if one part of the local economy fails.

When helping restore basic services, it's important to think about how people will use them. This is one reason the ICRC has switched to using solar cells to power the pumps they install or refurbish, says Abuelhasan.

"Solar panels are more expensive but they are sustainable," she says. "A vulnerable community may not be able to maintain a generator and buy fuel over time and if there is tension in the area, how will they transport the fuel?"

### Living day to day

But the response cannot just be about economics and food. Climate change and conflict pose new challenges in terms of protection for people's basic safety. In many communities, for example, women go out to gather wood for cooking. If they have to travel farther due to deforestation or desertification, they are increasingly in danger.

Because of conflict and climatic conditions, many villages in the region are inhabited almost entirely by women, the men having left to find work. "Here in this village, for the most part, only the women remain," says 22-year-old Ramatou, from the village of Kordo Fonda in Tillabéri in western Niger.

"This year we had no rain in our village, unlike the other areas that had abundant water. As a result, the harvest is very small," she says, adding that the women are working as quickly as possible to produce food for themselves and for the market. "Myself, if I had the opportunity, I would leave. It doesn't matter where as long as I find work and financial independence. Here, we live day to day." ■

People in the Sahel have always shown great resilience in the face of extreme challenges. Abdul Kassim Sanogo (left), president of the local youth group behind the Djamburu market garden is one example. Here, young people use new and old farming methods to make a living and produce food for people in Bourem, eastern Mali. But as agricultural livelihoods become more difficult to maintain, many turn to other, town-based jobs. Radiyou Amadou repairs motorcycles at his shop in Bourem.

Photos: Leonard Pongo/Noor/ICRC

Climate change is altering the historical high- and low-water seasons, occasionally causing intense flash floods, disrupting fishing grounds and livelihoods. Here, people in the town of Bourem gather on the banks of the River Niger in north-eastern Mali.

Photos: Leonard Pongo/Noor/ICRC



# A window of time

**As storms and floods become more extreme and less predictable, weather forecasts trigger relief funding before disaster strikes, giving people time to prepare and potentially saving many more lives.**



➦ Beatriz Paredes with her son at home in Iquitos, Peru.

**B**eatriz Paredes remembers the last time that the River Amazon almost destroyed her wooden home in Belén, a neighborhood in the city of Iquitos, Peru.

Water levels rose dramatically in just a few days and her living room, kitchen and bedroom were covered in murky river water. While the flood receded, her family of five slept on wooden planks that they had placed just below the house's roof, making an improvised 'attic' that kept them dry.

"Some days we had to go to sleep without eating," says Paredes, who sells sugar-cane juice at the local market and was not able to work during the flood. "I lost my pots, furniture, dishes; everything that we could not store in the attic was taken by the river."

Flooding is part of life in Belén, a riverside community that is home for Paredes and thousands of people who cannot afford to pay rent in safer parts of Iquitos. But the district — touted by local tour guides as the 'Venice of the Amazon' — is being increasingly subjected to more dramatic flood seasons as climate change affects weather patterns in the Amazon basin.

In 2012, an estimated 200,000 people were affected by the floods in Iquitos and the surrounding province of Loreto that almost wiped out Paredes' home. In 2015, another spate of extreme weather

caused flooding along Peru's stretch of the Amazon, affecting more than 160,000 people according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

## **Paradigm shift**

As seasonal floods become more extreme, a new programme run by the Peruvian Red Cross seeks to dramatically reduce the number of people impacted by flooding by completely reversing the way disaster relief happens. The idea is to provide humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable people before floods hit, so that they can stay safe and healthy during these extreme events.

"We have been a humanitarian organization that traditionally focused on responding to disasters," says Kemper Mantilla, the project's national coordinator for the Peruvian Red Cross. "What we are doing now is a paradigm shift."

Pioneered by the German Red Cross and the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, based in The Hague (Netherlands), the approach is known as Forecast-based Financing (FbF) and has been rolled out in numerous countries around the world, from Bangladesh to Togo.

In Peru, it is being tested in three areas that are prone to extreme weather events: towns along the Pacific Ocean coastline impacted by extreme rainfalls related to the El Niño phenomenon; villages high in the Andes mountains, located at 3,800 metres above sea level, where alpaca farmers struggle to deal with cold snaps and glacial snowstorms; and parts of the River Amazon basin around Iquitos.

In the case of the alpaca herders, forecasts trigger funds that enable construction of shelters and provision of medicine for the livestock. "We lose 15 to 20 alpacas each winter," says Flavio Cabana, who has a herd of 400 alpacas in the Arequipa region





of southern Peru. “The young ones are the most likely to die from the cold.”

The programme works with the national meteorological and hydrological service of Peru, which analyses incoming weather patterns and provides Peruvian Red Cross staff with advance warning of extreme events headed towards vulnerable communities. That gives humanitarian workers time to prepare and distribute help to people in need.

“We try to get scientific information into the hands of decision-makers as fast as we can,” says Juan Bazo, climate science adviser for the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, another key partner in FbF projects around the world.

“The benefit of this programme is that it uses weather forecasts, which give us a window of time to act, so that we can get help to the most vulnerable people.”

### Preparation is critical

The real FbF work happens long before the dreaded forecasts of heavy rains or floods. In Iquitos, which is located deep inside the Amazon rainforest, the Peruvian Red Cross started to set up its FbF programme in 2016.

The first step, says Mantilla, was to identify neighbourhoods that could benefit from the project based on risk-data analyses that factor in the communities’ exposure to danger and vulnerability. Through community meetings, residents discussed their greatest needs during extreme floods, like the ones in 2012 and 2015.

During these meetings, it became evident that access to drinking water was

one of the main challenges faced by the residents of Belén and several rural communities participating in the project.

Most people in these communities don’t have safe drinking water in their homes. They collect water in the nearby river for washing and cooking, and drink bottled water that they buy in local markets.

During floods, the distribution of bottled water collapses, while river water carries sediments and pollutants that make it dangerous to consume, Mantilla says.

With funding from an IFRC early action funding mechanism, the Peruvian Red Cross is now prepared to distribute water filters to 600 families in the region of Loreto the next time an extreme flood approaches. The Red Cross has run several simulations and drills to ensure the distribution will go smoothly.

“These filters separate sediments from the water and eliminate bacteria,” Mantilla explains. “They help us to prevent the spread of intestinal diseases.”

### ‘No product to sell’

For Beatriz Paredes, who survives on a daily income of around US\$ 8 per day this kind of help during floods can also make a big difference — using a water filter can save her from having to purchase expensive bottled water.

Paredes says that she has also struggled to buy food and other basic items during floods because these weather events take away her main source of income: the sugar-cane juice that she sells in the local market.

📍 In Iquitos, Peru, life revolves around the river. When it floods, every part of life is affected.



📍 In the Andes mountains of Peru, forecasts trigger rapid deployment of resources that help alpaca herders protect their animals from extreme cold and snowstorms. See our video feature at [www.rccrmagazine.org](http://www.rccrmagazine.org).





🔗 Farmer Marcos Paimaya grows coriander (cilantro) along the river. He says floods hinder his efforts to save money so his children can get a better education.

Photo: Bruno Chavez/Peruvian Red Cross

***“The benefit of this programme is that it uses weather forecasts, which give us a window of time to act, so that we can get help to the most vulnerable people.”***

**Juan Bazo**, climate science adviser for the Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre, based in the Netherlands

“When the water level rises, my land gets flooded and I can’t cut any cane,” says Paredes, who grinds her own sugar cane every morning on a large juice extractor. “And when I have no product to sell, we struggle to get by.”

Marcos Paimaya, a coriander (cilantro) farmer who lives in the village of Cantagallo, about an hour down the river from Iquitos, faces similar challenges.

Seasonal floods cover a forest clearing where he plants his crops. Paimaya says he prepares for the inevitable floods by saving money during the months of the year in which he can work. He has also built a boat to get around when the river seeps into his village.

But larger floods that take longer to recede eat away at his savings and make it harder for him to get around in a small boat, forcing him to pay for transport on larger boats when he needs to go somewhere.

“Those floods eat into my livelihood,” Paimaya says. “They affect my ability to provide for my children.”

### **Striving for a ‘better place’**

For these reasons, a key part the Peruvian Red Cross's FbF project is a money transfer programme for vulnerable families. The next time the Amazon starts to swell to extreme levels, 400 families will be given a one-time cash payment of approximately 220 Swiss francs (about US\$ 225), a few days before their villages and neighbourhoods begin to flood.

It’s not a large amount. But it can help families get food, buy medicines, pay for transport or solve any other problems brought about by flooding, says Natalia Gomez de Travesedo, the German Red Cross’s FbF delegate in Peru and Ecuador. This type of funding helps the Red Cross reach communities that could potentially be affected earlier than traditional programmes that dispense funds after disaster strikes, Gomez de Travesedo explains.

The programme’s impact in the Amazon still has to be measured, she adds. But for people such as Marcos Paimaya, this kind of help relieves him from many of the burdens brought by the floods.

Like many parents here, Paimaya works feverishly to save money to put his four children through high school. It’s their one shot, he says, at having a better life. All the flood-related expenditures can be a big setback towards realizing that dream, he says.

“I burn my back [in the sun] every day so my children can be in a better place,” says Paimaya, adding that he never finished high school himself. “I want them to get higher education, so that perhaps they can move somewhere else and not suffer from floods and all the complications that we have here in our farm.” ■

By **Manuel Rueda**

Manuel Rueda is a freelance journalist based in Bogotá, Colombia.



## PUBLICATIONS



### The cost of doing nothing IFRC, 2019

200 million. That's the number of people who by 2050 could need international humanitarian aid every year as a result of climate-related disasters and the socio-economic impact of climate change — nearly double the level of need today, according to the IFRC's *The cost of doing nothing* report. By 2030, meanwhile, the report estimates that the annual cost of climate-related humanitarian response will likely reach US\$ 20 billion per year. The report urges governments and aid agencies to invest in measures that will protect people from the impacts of climate change, prevent the suffering of millions of people and save billions of dollars.

Available in English

### The Humanitarian Metadata Problem: “Doing no harm” in the digital era

Privacy International/ICRC 2019

New technologies continue to present great risks and opportunities for humanitarian action. But, according to this report, to ensure that their use does not result in any harm, humanitarian organizations must develop and implement appropriate data-protection standards, including robust risk assessments. This comprehensive study aims to provide people who work in the humanitarian sphere with the knowledge they need to understand the risks involved

in the use of certain new technologies. The study was commissioned by the ICRC to Privacy International.  
Available in English

### Cash and Voucher Assistance — Economic Security

ICRC, 2019

This booklet offers a brief introduction to how the ICRC provides people with emergency relief and support for their long-term economic recovery through cash and vouchers. This kind of support can help people weather a crisis and rebuild their livelihoods and keep the local economy going, according to the booklet. Through such economic security programmes, the booklet documents ways the ICRC brings victims of armed conflict and other violence rapid and flexible assistance to meet their essential needs and cover unavoidable expenses in ways that are sustainable and respectful of people's dignity.

Available in English

### Heatwave Guide for Cities

Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre 2019

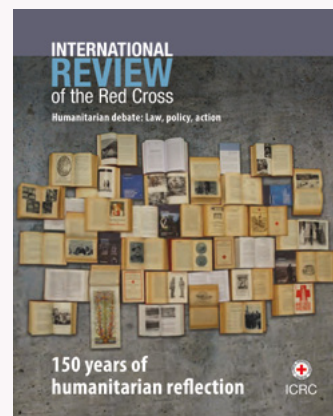
The impacts of extreme heat are deadly and they are preventable. In recent years, heatwaves have broken temperature records and led to the deaths of thousands of people. The 2003 European heatwave killed more than 70,000 people, while the 2015 heatwave in India reportedly killed over 2,500 people. But as this guide suggests, these figures are most likely underestimates since deaths from heatwaves are often not attributed to the heatwave itself, but to illnesses that are made worse by heat, such as heart disease. The guide offers practical steps that individuals, communities, cities and countries can take to reduce the risks posed by these increasingly frequent disasters.

Available in English

### 150 years of humanitarian reflection International Review of the Red Cross

ICRC 2019

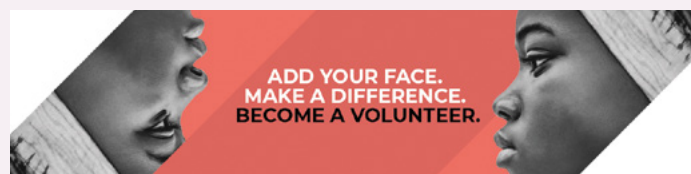
Founded in 1869, the International Review of the Red Cross has documented and analyzed humanitarian endeavors from the first relief missions during the Franco Prussian war to the present day. The oldest international publication devoted to humanitarian law and action, its archives represent a precious primary source on the history the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. To mark its 150th anniversary this year, the



journal produced this special edition exploring how the journal reflects the evolution of warfare and humanitarian action.

Available in English

## ONLINE



### Faces of climate change

IFRC, 2019

This digital campaign from the IFRC challenges people around the world to become volunteers specifically to take action on climate change. “The climate has changed and the risks are rising: now we need to rise up too,” the campaign states. “The climate crisis is not something that will happen in the future. It is happening right now, so we need to act right now. Will you join us?” In particular, it suggests things people can do individually, in their personal lives and then also as volunteers for Red Cross and Red Crescent National Societies engaged in helping communities prepare for and cope with climate-related crises.

Available at <https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/facesofclimatechange/>

### How well could you negotiate on the front line?

ICRC, 2019

A new interactive, online narrative from the ICRC functions much like an online learning game. But the topic is deadly serious. It aims to show how front-line negotiators face horrific dilemmas and how humanitarian aid workers often have to “strike a brutal balance between making an impact and maintaining their principles”. Although the narrative is a work of fiction, the challenges and dilemmas embedded in the story are part of daily reality for ICRC teams in the field. “Negotiating under pressure and in insecure environments is a critical skill that allows the ICRC to help those most in need,” notes the explanatory text. “As this story shows, negotiations on the front line are highly challenging and fraught with dilemmas. If negotiations fail, people may not receive the assistance and protection they so urgently need.”

Available at [www.icrc.org](http://www.icrc.org) in English and French



Why did we put this picture of a shaggy animal on the back cover? In many parts of the world, the ability of animals to stay healthy during extreme weather is critical to the health and well-being of entire communities of people. See our story on page 26 and visit our website ([www.rccmagazine.org](http://www.rccmagazine.org)) to find out about a novel programme to help communities protect their alpaca herds from extreme weather.

Photo: Bruno Chavez/Peruvian Red Cross

