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“Preserve some glimpses of humanity in the heart of darkness of human suffering”

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Ladies and gentlemen, good evening.

My name is Pablo Percelsi, and I am a humanitarian worker.

Back in the early 2000's, when I was a young student of Political Sciences at the University of Lausanne, Switzerland, I wanted to be a diplomat. I was so passionate for subjects such as contemporary history, geopolitics, macroeconomics and international relations that a career in the foreign affairs seemed to be the most natural continuation of my studies.

Then something happened. One morning in autumn 2001, while procrastinating the writing of a paper for which I was already late, I bought a copy of an Italian newspaper and sat in the library's cafeteria to read it. You all remember these months: 9/11 had just happened and the International Coalition had just begun its war against the Talibans. That morning, my attention was immediately captured by an article written by a delegate of the International Committee of the Red Cross – the ICRC.

The piece was a very powerful account on how this man had returned to Kabul to resume his work – two months after being forced to flee Afghanistan, because of the start of the hostilities. It was beautifully written, but it was a story of violence and suffering – a stark reminder on how gloomy and dangerous the world can be. And yet, this Red Cross worker was happy to return to Kabul, because that's where he could be of biggest help to the victims of war. He had been working there for 12 years, and during that decade he had been slowly but steadily building what had become the project of a lifetime – the ICRC's Physical Rehabilitation Program (PRP) in Afghanistan.

Afghanistan, as you might know, has a staggering percentage of amputees among its population. Littered with mines and unexploded ordnances, plagued by conflicts and doomed by decades of confrontations, this Central Asian country bears in the very flesh of its daughters and sons the brutal cost of the war.

The ICRC's PRP program was designed to mend these wounds – at least partially. But under this man's supervision, it grew larger: not only amputees were given artificial limbs or orthotics support, not only were they taught how to walk again. To many of them, the ICRC offered micro credits to restart a profession, it provided specific education and trainings, and in many cases, it even gave them a job (the overwhelming majority of the program's employees – from the janitors to the physiotherapists – are actually former patients).

This man's name is Alberto Cairo. A man – I discovered later – that had drifted away from his legal career in Italy to become a physiotherapist. I still vividly remember how that morning, I decided that I wanted to know more about him and about the organization he was working for. Too bad for the paper I was supposed to write: I rushed back home, switched on my computer (smartphones were still science fiction!) and started browsing the web, eagerly looking for information.

Of course, for someone who grew up in Switzerland, the ICRC was not completely unknown. I had somehow heard about the story of Mr Henry Dunant, a businessman from Geneva who, in 1859, witnessed the horrific aftermaths of the Battle of Solferino, in Northern Italy. I had a general clue on how Mr Dunant, deeply shaken by the experience, incepted among the European Leaders the idea of creating some societies supposed to help the war wounded – leading to the creation of the first Red Cross (and later Red Crescent) Societies.

But that day, I also realized how Mr Dunant had ignited another powerful idea – the concept that even wars have limits, which should be somehow formalized. Civilians must be spared by the belligerent. Those who fight must carefully chose their methods of warfare, to avoid unnecessary suffering. The wounded must be granted decent medical treatment, and prisoners of war must be treated humanly by their captors.

The International Humanitarian Law (IHL), first embodied in the Geneva Convention of 1864 was born on an Italian battlefield, but it was bound to become a universal concept. In the 150 years that followed, ICRC delegates travelled from one side of the planet to the other, in order to assist the victims of armed conflicts (precisely like Mr Alberto Cairo), but also to protect them. And to achieve this, they would use no weapons, nor would they resort to any coercive mean.

In the spirit of neutrality that had become one of the emblematic features of Switzerland, their host country, ICRC delegates negotiated with statesmen, generals, soldiers, rebels. They tried to gain their trust, sometimes acted as intermediary among parties, relentlessly pushed to maintain a tiny – yet important – humanitarian spaces in conflicts and situations of violence.

At the end of that day, I was completely absorbed by the romantic tale of the life of Mr Cairo and by the endeavors of an Organization whose personnel has been present on most of the frontlines of contemporary history. My paper had not advanced by an inch, but I couldn't care less – I had found an inspiration! I decided – with all the passion that young age can bring – that I would give a try to a career in the humanitarian sector. Maybe only for a couple of years, before reverting back to my original plan to become an Ambassador.

I shared my ideas with my friends and family, and you can imagine their reactions. Not only the idea of abandoning the comfortable life of Switzerland for far and dangerous destinations seemed very bizarre to them, but the very concept that wars can be humans sounded nothing far than crazy. And who could blame them?

Try to remember those months. More than 3'000 people had just been killed in worst single terror attack of human history, and the discourse of the belligerent at that time was extremely blunt: there is no such a thing as a neutral humanitarian space in the Global War on Terror. Either you're with us, or you're against us. Period.

Many of my friends – the most patient ones – thought I would quickly change my mind. Some others – the most honest I guess – simply thought I had lost my mind. “Stop talking nonsense, Pablo. Focus on a sound and reasonable career at home, and first and foremost, FINISH THAT PAPER! It is due in 48 hours”!

I eventually met the deadline (not without struggling, I have to admit). To the satisfaction of my father and my professors, I graduated from the University of Lausanne in 2004, but the bug had not gone away. So I ended up applying for an internship position at the ICRC Headquarter in Geneva, which I got. And at the beginning of 2006, I was ready to leave for a brand new adventure “on the field”, as we say in our humanitarian jargon.

And even if I was happy, even I was showing bold enthusiasm to my entourage, I was simply terrified. What if the realistic approach of many of my friends was the right one? What if my project was nothing but the romantic dream of a spoiled, naïve youngster? And even worse: what about my security? Accounts of aid worker getting kidnapped and killed in war zones were not rare – even those working for a big and respected organization like the Red Cross.

Ten years later, I am still here. The plans to join the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have moved first to the backburner, then to the fridge. And I haven't been disappointed. During my career, I have met with the Rebels of Ivory Coast and discussed with them about the Rules of War, and the visionaries ideas of Mr Henry Dunant. I have visited the Prisons run by Hamas in the Gaza Strip. I have roamed the desert of West Darfur to bring assistance to the populations living there. I have witnessed the end of the war in Sri Lanka, and helped organize the relief operations for the hundreds of thousands of displaced persons that were fleeing the combats.

I have managed the ICRC operations in Northern Afghanistan, where I have finally met Mr Cairo – realizing that he can be a stubborn, grumpy man sometimes: that made me like the man even more. I have run our structures and security in Baghdad and Central Iraq, among scary waves of car bombs. And, in my current position in Geneva, I've contributed to the overall management of our action in the Near and Middle East Region – from Cairo to Teheran, from Beyrouth to Sana'a.

I have met foot soldiers, tribal chiefs, Army Generals and religious leaders. I've discussed with Ministries and even Heads of States on issues such as respect of International Humanitarian Law and the very relevance of humanitarian action in their zones of responsibilities. No, I wasn't disappointed: a career in the ICRC offered me

so many opportunities to discover the world and meet people so different from me that, back in University I could hardly dream of.

By the way, Mr Alberto Cairo is still in Kabul. Although I am not a particularly spiritual person, I am rather comfortable in saying that the achievements of the Physical Rehabilitation Program in Afghanistan are nothing short of a miracle. In a country which is still in turmoil, Alberto and his teams welcome scraps of men and women in their centers, put them back on their feet, and give them a fresh new start in life. Something those patients can be proud of. In short, the ICRC gives back dignity to victims of war.

But, ten years later, the big questions I was asking myself are still there, and they are more relevant than ever. Is humanitarian action still appropriate in today's world – a chaotic world where multipolar confrontations and conflicts are becoming more and more brutal? Is IHL still pertinent in theaters where attacks on civilian populations are becoming scarily regular? Is putting our lives at risk – attacks on humanitarian workers have drastically increased in the last years – still worth something considering the overall results? Can we keep our field teams motivated, when all they see in their daily routines is the evil that men do?

The answer I give to all the above questions is still yes. But in order to maintain our pertinence and relevance, we humanitarians must change and adapt to contemporary challenges. The Humanitarian sector has already changed enormously. It has become more professional – the most cynical among us would even state that it has become an industry.

The ICRC budget has grown from 1 to 1.6 billion Swiss Francs in the last decade. We managed rather big achievement – in 2015 only, for example, the ICRC has improved access to water and sanitation to more than 30 million individuals. We distributed basic aid such as food to 13 million people. 2.9 million Medical consultations were carried out, more than 900'000 detainees were visited in more than 80 countries worldwide. We approached world leaders to advocate for a global and consistent humanitarian agenda.

And, in order to better understand the world around us and how to maintain a professional excellence, we have established and deepened our relations with the corporate sectors. Event like this one – to which I am much honored to participate – are great occasions to exchange points of view, get a better reading where the civil society is going, and to properly address the challenges to come.

To rephrase the words that a prominent politician recently used in his speech to the United Nations General Assembly: we're humanitarian, and we're here to help. If we can preserve some glimpses of humanity even in the heart of darkness of human suffering, then we can perhaps contribute to change the world for the better. I hope that you all, with your knowledge and expertise, can help us in doing so.

Thank you very much.

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