



Award of the 2024 Sydney Peace Prize to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement

Sydney Town Hall, 18 June 2024

Remarks of the Special Rapporteur on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms while Countering Terrorism, Ben Saul

Good morning Lord Mayor of Sydney, members of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement, representatives of the Sydney Peace Prize, and Distinguished Guests,

I am thrilled to celebrate the award of the Sydney Peace Prize to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. It is an inspired choice. For over 160 years since its origin, the Movement has been an extraordinary force for good in the darkest theatres of human violence. As an international lawyer, I've long admired it as the guardian of international humanitarian law – the rules that acknowledge war is a reality but seek to impose restraint and humanity on it and alleviate unnecessary human suffering.

As the United Nations Special Rapporteur on human rights and counter-terrorism, every week I see the Movement's vital work in terrible wars, from Islamic State in the Levant in the Middle East to Boko Haram in West Africa. The Movement:

- promotes respect for humanitarian law among state and non-state armed forces;
- uses humanitarian law to protect prisoners, enable the release of hostages, and facilitate life-saving humanitarian relief and medical care for civilians;
- forges consensus among countries on how to interpret and apply humanitarian law, from terrorism to drones to artificial intelligence; and
- educates governments and the public that even war has rules, including in Australia where some of our own let us down so badly in Afghanistan.

The Movement typically enjoys unparalleled trust, confidence and legitimacy among even the most bitter enemies because of its fundamental principles of independence, impartiality and neutrality, its confidential working methods, and its long and reliable track record in the field.

Its magic power is that it talks to everyone – even terrorists who are demonized and dehumanized by politicians and the media – in the proven hope that intimate human dialogue may improve behaviour on the battlefield or in the prison cell. Often it is the only external actor with access on the ground.

Regrettably the Movement is needed more than ever before. War is resurgent. The world faces perhaps the highest number of armed conflicts since the Second World War – 120 conflicts involving 60 countries and 120 armed groups. Over 162,000 people died in the last year alone – the highest number in the 30 years since the tragic post-Cold War decade of the 1990s – and there are now 110 million people displaced by conflict.

Yet, at this hour when the Movement is most needed, obstacles to its work are proliferating. The rules it upholds – humanitarian law – are under attack in many quarters by those, including great powers, who believe that self-defence or other “just” causes justify overriding the legal restraints on the way war is fought.

Destructive misinformation and disinformation have been spread about the role of the Movement in wars in Ukraine and Gaza, based on misunderstandings about the way it works, or deliberate campaigns to discredit it. An era of polarization and political extremism is threatening the humanitarian consensus in the Geneva Conventions of 75 years ago, and the principle of justice, inscribed at Nuremberg, that those who commit grave violations must be held accountable for them.

Wars are also more dangerous than ever for humanitarians. The staff and volunteers of the Movement selflessly put their lives at risk to assist and protect strangers, often in other countries. Many have paid the ultimate price in service to humanity – almost 50 staff and volunteers are killed each year – thousands across history – and many more have been kidnapped. At least 33 have been killed in Gaza alone in seven months. I pay tribute to these brave, unsung heroes.

Massive budget cuts to the ICRC in the past two years have led to thousands of job losses and the closure or reduction of dozens of offices worldwide. It is a symptom of the wider disease of the weakening of international institutions in a climate of growing geopolitical tension, when collective responses to global problems are needed more than ever.

The award of this Prize is a chance to celebrate the very best among us. It is also a clarion call to governments and peoples everywhere to renew their support for the Movement – to mobilize powerfully against the forces that seek to unravel the rules of humanity and return us to the unbounded savagery of past wars.

Thank you.