



Opening of the exhibition “Humanitarian Principles. Here and Now”

Welcome remarks by Ambassador Pascale Baeriswyl

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Mr President, Mme la Cheffe de cabinet, Excellencies, dear colleagues

On behalf of Laetitia Courtois, Head of the ICRC office here in NY and my Swiss mission team, let me tell you how happy I am to warmly welcome you to this short opening on a most important topic: “Humanitarian Principles. Here and Now”. Thank you all for being present tonight – and to Ambassador Jun and Cheffe de Cabinet Viotti for accepting to say a few words - despite your really heavy workload.

This opening symbolically marks an opening in three respects:

First, it goes hand in hand with the re-opening of the U.N. premises. Today’s event is the first of its kind since the beginning of the pandemic. I sincerely thank the UN Secretariat for making it possible and for all the support given to us.

Second, as you all know, we are also at the beginning of the protection of civilians week. Tomorrow, the Presidency is organizing the open debate of the Security Council, and I am sure, Ambassador Jun is going to tell us more about it. The PoC week shall bring us together to join forces in order to protect human lives. The timing is good, but for a very sad reason. The reality we face is extremely sobering: conflicts such as the recent escalation in the Middle East or the violence in Myanmar continue to take a heavy toll on civilian life and indiscriminate attacks occur with horrifying frequency. Last year, civilians counted for almost 90% of casualties in urban warfare. The pandemic and its devastating impact on conflict-affected countries and their healthcare systems further intensify the dire situation, with disproportionate effects on women and girls.

So, what relevance has an art exhibition against this backdrop? Faced with humanitarian crisis most peoples’ first priority is simply to survive, art is at best an afterthought. At the same time, art has always played an important role in the way we process the horror of armed conflict. Until very recently, one of the most famous artistic studies of war, Pablo Picasso’s “Guernica”, was a silent, but forceful reminder of the reality of war on our daily way to the Security Council chamber. Art not only comments on human tragedy and crisis, it can also help us to make sense of it and thus offer a certain degree of comfort and resilience.

During the recent months, art often provided a channel to unify people and to sooth their despair. We probably all remember the images of musicians, who held concerts on their balconies, making everyone trying to forget the reality of the pandemic for a few minutes. So, finally and thirdly, art in itself is an opening. It allows us to look at reality through different lenses, paving the way for a change of perspectives and maybe increase – beyond our pure rationality - mutual understanding.

In the photographs you can see on display here and the videos you can download on your mobile, ten Swiss artists share with us their view on humanitarian principles in everyday life. The art works speak differently to every one of us, hopefully inspiring a wide range of reactions. The power of art shall create the space for deeper reflections and mutual exchange on the humanitarian space and its underlying principles. It allows us to have a dialogue on humanity with the potential of better understanding the complexity of humanitarian operations. And, hopefully, it can contribute to our discussions on protection of civilians.

But let there be no misunderstanding: While we hope for artistic inspiration and a widening of our perspectives, and while my country is always looking for compromises and bridge-building, Switzerland is also convinced that we have to strictly comply with the humanitarian principles themselves: Humanity, Impartiality, Neutrality and Independence. The key to ensure the protection of civilians in armed conflict is a full implementation of international humanitarian law. In light of the pandemic, it is even more crucial to base our emergency responses on principles and to ensure the protection of health care. The adoption of Security Council resolution 2286 five years ago demonstrated a high level of political will in this regard, however, much is left to be done.

I'm looking forward to a vibrant PoC week and hope that this exhibition can enrich our discussions. It remains on display until 11 June and is accessible to the wider UN membership. I would like to encourage you to come and see it with colleagues, interact with the questions in the code, and invite colleagues to our common dialogue on humanity.

And it is now my honor to give the floor to the President of the Security Council, H.E. Zhang Jun, he will be followed by Cheffe de cabinet Maria Luiza Viotti. Laetitia Courtois, Head of the ICRC office, will then share her impressions on some specific pictures. She may, however, not be completely impartial, but I'm sure she will tell us why.

I thank you for your attention.