

ICRC Statement on land release

Thursday 5 June 2008

Thank you Mr. Co-chair,

One of the main objectives of humanitarian mine action is indeed to release land that is contaminated or suspected to be contaminated by weapon contamination as rapidly, safely and as cost effectively as possible. Land release can be achieved through a variety of means, from a structured assessment of the history and characteristics of that land, through to full clearance using assets such as manual mine clearance, detection dogs, mechanical means, either individually or in combination.

These methods have resulted in thousands of square kilometres of land being released back to communities for productive use, and millions of landmines and ERW destroyed. However, much effort has been spent clearing land that was never contaminated. Historically, non-technical surveys have often unintentionally inflated the number and size of suspected hazardous areas and as a result, large areas of land have often been cleared without actually locating any explosive hazard.

It is clear, therefore, that an internationally agreed, rigorous process for declaring land clearly not affected by mines and ERW is urgently needed. Many country programmes and national authorities have already developed their own approaches to releasing land without undertaking full clearance processes. However, the lack of globally accepted and codified guidelines makes this a process that is still viewed with suspicion by some. We welcome the work done by the GICHD together with mine action partners in researching non-technical land release processes, developing commonly agreed and rigorous procedures and processes.

We support the view that land release is an umbrella term that encompasses all methods aimed at proving that land is clear of mines and ERW – from non-intrusive data analysis through to technical survey and full clearance by means of intrusive technical approaches. We do not see land release as a new approach: it has been implemented for many years, but it is only now that all the elements are coming together and grouped under the common term of land release.

The ICRC welcomes the current development of an IMAS that provides the conceptual framework under which mine action stakeholders gain a common understanding of the overall land release process and its sub components, and enable the development of a national land release policies. All too often at the non operational level, the various functions within mine action are seen as separate and distinct, when in fact operationally they should be regarded simply as different components of a fully integrated approach.

The nature of mine contamination and mine clearance means that there will always be some element of risk associated with land release – be it through technical clearance or the review of data. However, adherence to an agreed, verifiable and inclusive process that includes the input not only of operators and national authorities, but also of communities will ensure that all have the confidence to speed up the release of land globally. The result should be faster and more cost effective land release without compromising safety. The ICRC is ready to support this process, both at the policy development level and in the field through the 16 weapon contamination programs we run in affected countries.