

Humanitarian *Visa d'Or* of the ICRC

2011-2017: seven years of reflection

The regional delegation of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in France created in 2011 the “Humanitarian Visa d’Or (Gold Visa)” in partnership with the prestigious International Festival of Photojournalism held in Perpignan, “Visa pour l’image” (Visa for Pictures). With an award of 8,000 euros, this prize recognises the photographer who will have been able to present, in 10 pictures, an issue concerning international humanitarian action and law. Between 2011 and 2014, “care in action” was selected by the jury, comprising representatives of international media and the humanitarian community. Since 2015, the theme of “women in war” has been proposed for the competition. The 2017 award winner, Angela Ponce Romero, 23 years old, exposed her work “Ayacucho, the missing in conflict” in Perpignan and was viewed, as the preceding ones, by more than 40,000 visitors.



2011. The First Square Kilometer of Freedom: "Change Square", Sana'a, Yemen

by | Catalina Martin-Chico



The ambulances, going from the city centre of Sana'a (Yemen), where the protests take place, to the "Change Square" infirmary are also the target of direct or indirect violences, coming back with windows broken or damaged by bullets.

Students, drop-outs, people unemployed or simply disillusioned – they are all there together, packed onto the square outside the new University of Sana'a, and now known as "Change Square". They are determined to stay there until President Ali Abdallah Saleh, who has held power in Yemen for 33 years, steps down. From the mountains in the North to valleys in South, from the shores of the Red Sea to the wadis of Hadramaut, youth movements have reached every province in the country. The "revolutionaries" are an improbable lot, and that is no doubt the first success story for the revolution. The people of Yemen have been looking at one another and speaking to one another; they have been discovering one another. Tribal men have had discussions with young students specializing in communication; socialist parliamentarians have been debating with Muslim women; shopkeepers from the old city have been listening to air force officers. Uniforms and titles are irrelevant: "We are all children of Yemen" proclaim the demonstrators.

As more and more people joined the advocates of change, the President's party suffered spectacular decline. Diplomats, ministers, parliamentarians, governors, officers and sheikhs, once loyal supporters of Ali Abdallah Saleh, have rallied to the demonstrator's cause, adopting their call for the president to go and the régime to fall. Change Square in Sana'a and Freedom Square in Tazeh are focal points for thousands of citizens who have chosen to embrace peaceful resistance. Yes, that is another original feature of the "revolution" – it is being conducted without

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weapons. In a country with more than 50 million firearms, and despite the many military checkpoints monitoring movements into and out of the city, it is not very difficult to get a Kalashnikov or a rocket-launcher. But opponents to the regime discovered that they could make demands without violence, simply by using words and by being there, although the armed conflict between President Saleh and the Al-Ahmar clan north of the capital almost pushed the “revolution” into a state of civil war. Demonstrators have been targets for snipers on rooftops and teargas and attacks by central security men wielding truncheons. Yet they have remained peaceful pacifists to the end, without firing a single shot. While the president is still hospitalized in Saudi Arabia, they have endeavoured to bring about a gradual, peaceful shift in power. They have called for a consolidation of the parliamentary regime, a new Yemen which they wish to see tackle corruption and injustice. Time is needed to succeed, and for them success is the only possible outcome. In the meantime, they shall return to the streets, quite aware that the security forces are waiting for them there. So they shall then chant: “Martyr, your blood has not been shed in vain”.

2012. Syria, inside Homs

by | Mani



Syria, Homs, Karm Al-Zaytoun. Loyalist snipers make numerous victims each day. The wounded are evacuated towards the closest healthcare centres to receive first aid, before being sent to a private hospital to try and have their life saved. They cannot go to the public hospital because of the presence of government authorities, with the risk of being arrested and tortured. Transfer towards the private hospital has to be carried out with precaution as snipers open fire on all vehicles transporting the wounded. This man, hit in the chest, will not survive to his wounds.

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Shortly before the Syrian uprising in 2011, the first people to be concerned as they sensed that revolution was on the way were the most determined opponents of Bashar el-Assad's régime. They could still remember 1982 and the Hama massacre, the cruel epilogue that crushed an Islamist revolt that had been going on for three years. At the time, the regime was led by Hafez el-Assad, the father of the current president, who had no qualms about firing heavy weapons on the fourth largest city in the country, leaving thousands dead, although no official figures were ever released. (According to estimates, the number of dead was between 10,000 and 20,000.)

The opponents were right. Since March 17, 2011, and the first killings in Deraa in the south of the country, the Syrian regime has again opted for a military response, plus a few purely cosmetic reforms on the side. When massive crowds gained control of the streets, peacefully, the régime was faced with a challenge, and attempted to push part of the opposition movement into armed confrontation, an area where it believed it held the advantage.

Under this pressure, the Free Syrian Army formed, their ranks filled with deserters and civilians, but the angry demonstrations still continued every Friday. Bashar el-Assad's calculation turned out to be short-sighted, as a classical guerilla force took shape, prepared to concede terrain when concentrated forces sent in by the regime from time to time proved to be too powerful, and then quick to return once the armored vehicles had set off for another rebel stronghold.

Another weak point of the regime was that it failed to rebuild the "wall of fear" which had been established over three decades or more of repression – from the Tadmor prison massacre in 1980 to the Sednaya prison massacre in 2008 – and despite the fact that since the beginning of the uprising the régime had set its militia forces, the Shabiha, to do the dirty work: summary executions, torture, ethnic cleansing, attacks on communities, rape and more.

Over the last fifteen months the country has been in the grips of unbelievable violence – the violence of a State with total disregard for even the most basic humanitarian principles. Hospitals, medical centres and doctors have been targeted, as opponents are methodically hunted down across the country. Eye-witness reports from Homs from special correspondents for the newspaper *Le Monde* and the NGO *Médecins sans frontières* describe organized manhunts through public buildings, and the wounded have no other choice than to rely on makeshift medical centres with little medical supplies, if they ever get there.

To help maintain its chance of survival, the Syrian regime has chosen the inhumane option, with no going back, spreading hate and triggering reprisals, settling old scores: the choice of scorched earth.

2013. Life and death in Aleppo

par | by Sebastiano Tomada



An abandoned ambulance in the neighbourhood of Moshed, one of the liberated zones of Aleppo and a stronghold of the Syrian Free Army. March 27th 2013.

Since July 2012, the battle had been raging between government forces and insurgents of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighting for control of the northern Syrian city of Aleppo. Medical centres treating casualties in rebel-held districts became a military target, forcing doctors to work in an undercover network of clinics and hospitals. One of these is Dar al-Shifa hospital: previously a private clinic owned by a businessman loyal to President Bashar Assad, Dar al-Shifa became a field hospital run by volunteer doctors, nurses and aides united in their opposition to the regime and the need to provide medical care to both civilians and rebels.

Sebastiano Tomada first covered the Syrian revolution in Idlib and along the border between Syria and Lebanon, then shifted his attention to Aleppo where he began covering the advances and losses of the Free Syrian Army. With a focus on daily life and medical conditions in a city under siege, Sebastiano shows the cruel reality for the men, women and children living in the besieged city of Aleppo.

2014. Humanitarian Crisis in the Central African Republic

by | **William Daniels**



Wounded Fulani children are watched over by MISCAs (African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic) soldiers in Bangui. Anti-Balaka (Christian self defense militia) are alleged to have attacked a Fulani (Muslim) village and killed a dozen adults and wounded numerous children. The children were presented to journalists, the president and the prime minister before being taken to hospital.

The Central African Republic has been plunged into an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. After a year of terror led by the mainly Muslim rebel Seleka group, anti-Balaka militia wreaked revenge in the west of the country on Muslims who fled or were killed. Entire districts were under siege; even women and children were victims of grenade attacks. There was little response from the international community. Soldiers with the African-led International Support Mission in the Central African Republic (MISCA) and French troops struggled to stop the massacres and population movements. Nearly one million (one fourth of the population) fled, becoming displaced persons, needing food and medical care.

For a long time the crisis in the Central African Republic was almost forgotten, having attracted little interest or support from the international community. The Central African Republic has been unstable and vulnerable for forty years now. According to the World Health Organization, life expectancy is the second lowest in the world, at only 48 years. The country has no proper healthcare system and relies on the commitment of international NGOs to provide medical care. Before the current crisis, the rate of malnutrition was 38%. Everyone in the country today suffers from malaria, with at least one attack a year per inhabitant.

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I have made a number of trips to the Central African Republic since December 2013, and have covered the humanitarian disaster, seeing camps for displaced persons in the capital city, such as M'Poko, a staggering sight at the airport where in the space of just a few days there was an influx of 100,000 people, mostly Christians and animists, fleeing the fighting between Seleka and anti-Balaka forces.

On a number of occasions I have traveled to the remaining Muslim communities, now isolated enclaves at PK-5, Begoua and Boda. Each site had similar scenes, with residents and others who had found shelter there ending up under siege, afraid to leave for fear of being killed, by gunshot, their throat cut, or being dismembered. Anti-Balaka fighters around the enclave throw grenades randomly, hitting women and children. Hygiene and health are appalling, and there is only minimal access to medical care.

When I returned to Boda in April this year, the situation was even more critical. It was difficult to deliver food supplies to the 10,000 people living isolated in the enclave there, as anti-Balaka harassment tactics often block the road to Bangui. Many children are suffering from severe malnutrition, mainly Fulani children as the Fulani ethnic group is subjected to discrimination within the enclave. Some medical care was provided by a part-time doctor and two nurses, but they are overwhelmed by the demand. The local hospital responded to pressure from the French forces, and recently opened again, but as it is outside the enclave, it was still too dangerous for Muslims to go there.

2015. The Minova trials

by | Diana Zeyneb Alhindawi



A victim – veiled to protect her identity – testifies and tells her story to the assembled court. On a November evening in 2012, around 8 p.m., Congolese government soldiers knocked on her door. Her five children scattered and hid in the bedroom. Her husband was already gone. He fled when he heard bullets fired earlier. When the soldiers entered the house, two of them threw her on the ground and began to rape her. The others began to pillage her home, carrying off the goods that her family had just received from an aid organisation – sacks of rice and corn, cans of cooking oil. Her husband returned in the morning. When he learned she had been raped, he left. He never returned.

Between February 12th and 19th 2014, a temporary court was installed in Minova, a locality on the edge of Lake Kivu in the East of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Trials are usually held in Goma, but for the victims of rape in Minova, the trip all the way to Goma would have been too costly. It is thus the court that moved to hear their testimony. 39 members of the of the armed forces of the DRC (FARDC), were accused of acts of violence committed during ten days of terror in November 2012, during which more than 1,000 women, men and children were raped only in the town of Minova. Finally, 37 military were accused of rape. The attack against civilians took place while the soldiers of the FARDC were fleeing from the rebels of the Movement of March 23rd which had taken control of the strategic town of Goma.

In 2011, the special representative of the United Nations in charge of sexual violences committed in periods of conflict, qualified the Democratic Republic of the Congo as “world capital of rape”. The Minova trial represents a real progress in the defence of rape victims: in particular this is the

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first time that so many soldiers are brought to trial. The complaints were heard by a military tribunal and there was no other possible appeal procedure with another court.

Because of stigmatisation towards rape victims, those who testified had dressed so as to remain anonymous; but even with these precautions, only 47 women came to deliver testimony. The court pronounced its verdict on May 5th 2014: only two soldiers were recognised as guilty of rape. One of these was condemned to lifetime imprisonment.

2016. Born into conflict: Child soldiers in Colombia

par | by Juan Arredondo



Caldas, Colombia. September 28, 2014. Maritza, Dalia and Maria walk along the main road that leads to the centre for demobilized child soldiers where they are taught agriculture related disciplines in preparation for their return to their communities.

For the past two years I've been photographing and interviewing current and former child soldiers throughout Colombia. What I have come across is a silenced latent crisis that has devastated the lives of the estimated 6,000 young men and women enlisted in illegal armed groups.

It is estimated that a quarter to nearly half of recruited combatants are women including girls as young as nine years old. Girls receive the same training as their male counterparts, they are taught to handle weapons, collect intelligence and take part in military operations; but they are also victims of sexual abuse at the hands of their commanders and in most instances forced to have an abortion if they get pregnant as a result of this abuse.

These young survivors are faced with the hardship of returning to their families living in extreme poverty. Moreover, they are stigmatized by Colombian society at large, which views them as criminals. In the face of economic instability because of discrimination, lack of education and insufficient family support, most of these children are forced to re-enter a cycle of violence and criminal activities.

2017. Ayacucho, Peru: the missing in conflict

par | by Angela Ponce Romero



Surrounding a priest, the survivors of a village close to Ayacucho address a prayer to their next of kin killed in the conflict in the 1990s, the remains of whom have been identified.

Ayacucho, in Quechua, the “Place of the Dead”, is the name of one of the main cities of the country. It is also the title of the photo report by Angela Ponce Romero, 23 years old, the youngest prize winner of the Humanitarian *Visa d’Or* of the ICRC, which is devoted to the people reported missing during the violences between government forces and the Shining Path armed group. During the worst years – the last two decades of the 20th century – numerous women were submitted to terror, recruited being children by various armed movements, victims of forced marriages or also of sexual abuse. Angela Ponce Romero shows in her report a few of these survivors, widows, orphans, in search of justice but also of the truth, in particular relating to what happened to their next of kin listed as missing.

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Translated from the French and English by the regional delegation of the ICRC in France and by Philip Wade.

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