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31st International Conference of the Red Cross Red Crescent
Geneva, 28 November–1 December – **For humanity**



31st INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

OF THE RED CROSS AND RED CRESCENT

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International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

Keynote address by the President, Mr. Tadateru Konoé

Madam President of the Swiss Confederation,
Mr. Prime Minister;
Ministers,
Excellencies,
Mr President of the International Committee of the Red Cross,
Distinguished representatives of the National Societies,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to address the 31st International Conference of the Red Cross Red Crescent as President of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. I am very much looking forward to the debates and discussions we will have over the coming days.

This morning, I will speak of the need to **build the capacities** of the IFRC's member National Societies; of implementing and promoting **strong disaster laws**, and of the importance of **promoting adherence to humanitarian principles** as a common ground for better coordination among partners.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

We are all well aware that humanitarian crises are increasing in number, scale and complexity, and that the responses of the international community are often generous. At the same time, donor governments and international organizations such as the United Nations can experience difficulties in both reaching vulnerable people, and maintaining access to them as necessary.

Against this backdrop, many humanitarian actors - including the UN family - increasingly emphasize the importance of, and the need for, strong and efficient operational partners at the local level.

National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, being recognized by all governments as their independent auxiliaries, are equipped to partner with governments in the fulfilment of domestic humanitarian responsibilities, within their own borders. Our National Societies also work within the framework of the Movement, including the rules adopted by the International Conference, to carry out humanitarian work internationally.

At the same time, the neutrality, impartiality and independence of National Societies and their actions – guaranteed by their adherence to the Fundamental Principles of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement - is often the best

approach to gain not only access to the people in need, but to gain their trust and confidence as well.

The Red Cross Red Crescent is well-placed to work with UN and other governmental, intergovernmental or humanitarian agencies in order to provide effective humanitarian assistance at local levels, particularly in politically sensitive and complex situations.

This unique strength was effectively translated into real action in the Middle East and North Africa region during the civil unrest that has affected many countries in that region this year. Red Crescent volunteers were among the first to respond, and in many cases the Red Cross Red Crescent was one among very few organizations to have good access to people in need.

This being said, our National Societies are at different stages of development. Like any agency, each has particular strengths and challenges. And there remains of course the need for external support to maximise their operational and institutional capacities, so that they may best carry out their humanitarian activities as auxiliary to the public authorities, and serve as strong and dependable local partners to international humanitarian actors.

Capacity building is one of the cornerstones of the Federation's work, and we draw on the knowledge, expertise and resources of the global network for the benefit of the entire membership. Our ambition is for member societies to reach their full potential in the service of the most vulnerable people. As the Federation's Strategy 2020 says, National Societies and their secretariat are called on to do more, do better and reach further, and this call for excellence requires strong National Societies.

The Federation and the ICRC share a common ambition of stronger National Societies. With the Federation in the leading role, the two organizations actively collaborate in this capacity building work and will continue to do so.

However, the Movement has limited resources for capacity building. We ask, on the part of government, that there is continued effort placed on fully understanding the needs, capacities, and value of their National Societies. In addition, we ask that further efforts are made to strengthen partnerships between National Societies and their governments, which preserve the mandate and independence of the society while securing long-term government support and funding for its development and capacity building.

A National Society also needs a conducive external environment if it is to function effectively. This includes ensuring that there is a comprehensive Red Cross Red Crescent law in place to protect the mandate and branding of the society, and endowing it with the necessary tax exemptions and facilities.

I am convinced that enhanced partnerships between governments and National Societies can make a significant difference, including through appropriate resourcing. Such partnerships are critical to ensure that National Societies have the necessary resources and capacities to coordinate and support their work and growth, including core functions such as emergency response and strengthening community resilience. It is also important to ensure enabling environments for volunteer development and improve accountability to our beneficiaries and donors.

No government, no matter how strong, can hope to do everything. So by strengthening its National Society, a government can make use of the resources mobilized by that Society, so that more can be achieved – particularly in support of marginalized groups that can be difficult to reach through official means.

A government can also draw on its National Society's expertise by allowing humanitarian professionals to sit at policy and decision-making tables. In the domestic context, a Red Cross or Red Crescent Society leads by example in good citizenship by promoting volunteerism at the community level, and this also has a positive economic effect. A recent Federation survey called "The value of volunteers" has shown that active Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers provided nearly six billion dollars worth of services worldwide in 2009 alone.

And, on the international stage, the humanitarian work of a strong National Society expresses solidarity and sympathy, creating a bridge between peoples and nations.

I therefore ask that the States here present help to build the capacities of their National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society. Your support will lead to a sustainable rise in the quality of disaster response operations, as well as that of long-term development programmes such as risk reduction, disaster preparedness, health and other community-based activities. This will raise the quality of life and resilience of the people you govern, and contribute to the well-being of your nation.

I look forward to our discussions under the agenda item on furthering the auxiliary role.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

The Red Cross Red Crescent's commitment to disaster preparedness, risk reduction, response and recovery, and to development work - including in health and social care - is undiminished. However, we are well aware that we must continue to improve and enhance our work in these areas if we are to meet the expectations in a world increasingly beset by complex disasters and crises.

As President of the Federation, I am sure that we will make progress at this International Conference, in relation to the themes of strengthening disaster laws, addressing inequitable access to health care for women and children in particular, and on migration – specifically ensuring access, dignity, respect for diversity and social inclusion. I will now focus on one of these topics – International Disaster Response Laws, or IDRL as it is known.

The Movement has always been at the forefront of raising humanitarian standards in order to make the world a safer place for all. Consider the ICRC's work as the guardian of International Humanitarian Law; the Federation's work on the Code of Conduct for The International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief - created by eight of the world's largest disaster response agencies in the summer of 1994 – and our continued engagement in international initiatives including the Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response, which is known as the Sphere project.

These have been followed most recently by the Federation's strong engagement in the "Guidelines for the domestic facilitation and regulation of international disaster relief and initial recovery assistance", also known as the IDRL Guidelines, which were adopted by the International Conference in 2007. These guidelines can help to both anticipate and solve common regulatory problems in international operations, helping to increase the speed of the entry of relief and to ensure oversight and control by domestic authorities. In the years that have passed since, the ongoing need for these guidelines to be implemented has been highlighted by a number of major disasters.

Recent examples include the earthquake in Haiti, which inspired a response from hundreds of foreign organizations, and the 2011 complex earthquake, tsunami and nuclear crisis in Japan, which was followed by more than 160 offers of assistance from government sources alone.

It is very clear that, because of the increasing number and complexity of disasters, governments need a balanced and well-prepared system as envisaged by the IDRL Guidelines if international assistance is to be managed effectively.

There have been some encouraging examples of implementation, but more work is needed to ensure that all States are prepared for the most common regulatory issues in international disaster response operations.

The Federation continues to work with National Societies, States and other partners in promoting the implementation of these guidelines. During this conference, we look forward to reviewing the global implementation process and to set future directions in IDRL.

The Federation's General Assembly, which preceded this International Conference, has called on the secretariat to extend its research, support and advocacy in the area of IDRL, including the promotion of stronger integration between Red Cross Red Crescent and non-governmental assistance in international response mechanisms to nuclear power plant accidents.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

In this changing world, full of complex challenges, few things remain constant. But the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement is still defined by - and driven by – its commitment to seven Fundamental Principles: humanity, neutrality, impartiality, independence, unity, universality and voluntary service.

The principles of humanity, impartiality and independence have become synonymous with the concept of humanitarian assistance among many other organizations, even including the UN agencies. The UN, after all, took its commitment to humanitarian principles directly from the 21st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent in Istanbul in 1969.

The importance of humanity, impartiality and independence is becoming even more critical as operational situations become more complex, and the numbers and diversity of humanitarian actors increases.

Our Movement must take into account both the changing nature of the humanitarian challenges in the world, and the increasing involvement of governments and the military in the relief phase of disaster response operations, particularly in sensitive areas. In light of this, we must build and maintain relationships with all actors engaged in relief and recovery, while working within our respective mandates and remaining true to the Fundamental Principles that set us apart.

These relationships must be carefully managed along our existing guidelines to ensure our continued long-term access to people in need. This will require cultural sensitivity and respect, as well as knowledge. And while we have had successes, more work needs to be done.

A recent international dialogue co-convened by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the Federation, the International Council of Voluntary Agencies and UN-OCHA highlighted that one of today's key challenges in bridging national and international assistance is insufficient mutual understanding, dialogue and knowledge-sharing among affected States and the international community. This has led to gaps in trust and confidence, as well as failures to coordinate, ultimately hindering our ability to work together effectively.

Continuing to foster and grow long-term relationships, working towards a culture of true respect and understanding for the positions and value of others, and critically examining one's own systems and ways of working, are necessary lessons learned in this regard.

We will continue to engage with external humanitarian actors and remind them that we work in accordance with our Fundamental Principles, in order to ensure continued respect for the mandates and identities of each Movement component.

As discussed during the Council of Delegates, as a Movement we are currently developing more internal practical guidance, tools and mechanisms for building relationships with key partners including UN agencies and the private sector, among others.

I encourage all Movement components to make tireless efforts in applying the Fundamental Principles and our humanitarian standards - including the Code of Conduct - precisely to actual situations in the field. And I call upon the States to respect such endeavours of the Movement's components and to execute the recommendations set out in the Code of Conduct for governments of both donor and aid-recipient countries, and the IDRL Guidelines.

In my duties as President of the Federation, I have often spoken of what I call the Spirit of Togetherness - National Societies and their secretariat working together effectively, learning from their different cultures, expectations and experiences. It is my hope that this International Conference will encourage the continued evolution and growth of a similar Spirit of Togetherness between the Movement and the States Parties.

Too much is at stake in this changing world. We have to work together for humanity, else we risk allowing the formation of a humanitarian vacuum – a worst-case scenario where people in need cannot access assistance due to non-respect of humanitarian principles. This would be an unacceptable failure, particularly in light of the tremendous potential that we all have as individuals and organizations, and as partners.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Let us enjoy a fruitful International Conference, in the Spirit of Togetherness, and in full respect of our Fundamental Principles.

Thank you very much.