

**31st International Conference
of the Red Cross and Red Crescent**

Opening address

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This 31st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent convenes under the slogan 'Our world – your move, for humanity'. For our common humanity; for the world we share and which again faces enormous challenges – wars and conflict, environmental threats, financial crisis, food shortages – to mention but a few. These challenges threaten not only the functioning of governments but also organizations like ours and – perhaps even more important – the everyday lives of people, in particular the most vulnerable in our societies, who ultimately, as a rule, end up paying the price for all hardships.

This gathering of Governments and National Societies of the Red Cross and Red Crescent as representatives of civil society is unique, in the true meaning of the word. Nowhere else, in no known structure, do these parties sit together, next to each other, on an equal footing, as equal partners, to analyze and discuss common humanitarian concerns. Further, this happens in a setting, in which political controversies and interests are left outside this building, which contributes to an environment that is not exactly everyday practice, especially for representatives of States. The fact that it is the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement that sets our agenda, adds to the uniqueness of this Conference.

Reflecting on how this is possible in today's so often divided world, leads me to the concept of trust. Trust in each other, trust between individual states and National Societies, trust in an open and honest dialogue, where no party is expecting to be taken advantage of or used for narrow political gains – in spite of the political agenda of governments and the humanitarian priorities of the Movement.

The aims of this Conference are to strengthen humanitarian law and local humanitarian action. I want to underline the word *strengthen*. In public perception, both mentioned areas of work are already intimately linked to the Red Cross Red Crescent. In the past, this Conference has been instrumental in developing humanitarian law, in emphasizing the importance of adhering to it and ensuring it stays relevant in the situations it is intended for. In the same way, the work of National Societies, reaching the smallest and most remote communities in every country of the world, is almost a synonym for humanitarian action in people's minds.

We come back to trust: the Movement enjoys the trust of beneficiaries, as well as of donors, supporters and partners that it will stay true to its fundamental principles, especially to humanity, impartiality and neutrality, in all its actions. As a matter of fact, the Red Cross Red Crescent is seen as the 'public good' all around the globe. This I have personally experienced when witnessing a variety of situations where trained volunteers, proudly carrying our emblems, have met people in need – such as migrants landing on the island of Lampedusa, victims of earthquakes and floods or drug users rescued in the streets.

In spite of impressive achievements, there is always room for improvement – as with everything in life. The issues we will discuss and deliberate upon during the next 4 days will in the end clarify what exactly we aspired for when setting *strengthening* as an objective – and you will be vital architects and contributors to that development.

The previous Conference in 2007 already reached important results in moving the humanitarian agenda forward. It also powerfully demonstrated that major humanitarian concerns truly are shared priorities for States as well as for our Movement. Another milestone was the recognition of National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies as auxiliaries to public authorities in the humanitarian field. There are not only formal, legal grounds for this role; perhaps even more so, such a mandate is the result of the broad reach of our work, nationally, regionally and internationally.

It is a statutory requirement for recognition that a National Society covers the entire territory of its home nation. However, it is more important that vulnerable people in need of humanitarian assistance and support, for whatever reason, can be accessed with our action. That makes our Movement an indispensable partner to every government, be it in responding to calamities and disasters or in reducing risks for natural disasters or the impact of climate change or in mobilizing communities in health promoting activities and in fighting discrimination and intolerance. The range is wide; it varies from country to country according to local needs and priorities. Again, the auxiliary role builds on trust – trust by authorities seeking to provide efficient services and needing assistance and by the beneficiaries, who know the Red Cross Red Crescent to be a reliable service deliverer.

Under the umbrella provided by the auxiliary role, good partnership between National Societies and their respective governments can indeed strengthen local humanitarian action. The energy is provided by millions of volunteers, who help mobilize the perhaps hidden or sleeping resources in communities around them. We just heard of such impressive work in Burundi. There are several 'Burundis' represented in this hall today, with equally committed volunteers, who give time and care to people, who give humanity a face and a name. We must salute these volunteers, whose value is remarkable, not only in terms of their humanity, but also in monetary terms. Their contribution to Society should never be under-estimated. They personify what Albert Einstein described – "*Only a life lived for others is worth living.*"

Links and relations are built between governments and Red Cross or Red Crescent National Societies when they work together in any form of humanitarian assistance. This partnership can extend borders; we have seen it work in major disasters and in response to humanitarian needs in conflicts and disturbances. A victim of the earthquake in Turkey or Haiti or of floods in Pakistan or of drought in Somalia becomes a neighbour in need of help, as do the men and women, children and elderly suffering in on-going conflicts, which uproot the security of their lives and turn them into vulnerable individuals in need of help and protection. Governments know, and trust, the channel, which the Movement provides for assistance throughout the world.

They can further strengthen it by providing for such national frameworks that contribute to disaster response crossing borders or provide resources for local programmes in their own immediate environment.

Humanitarian work is not only protection and assistance. Equally importantly, it contributes to building a world without fear and prejudice. As we well know, one leads to the other – fear is at the core of prejudice, intolerance and, ultimately, discrimination and xenophobia. Violence feeds violence. Red Cross Red Crescent volunteers and in particular, the large youth representation among them, who are driven by the fundamental principles that you just

heard, are also messengers for a culture of peace, for better understanding and acceptance of different cultures and people, for resolving conflicts and differences in dialogue. The Conference slogan calls on us to make our move – for humanity. Change begins at home – we are all familiar with this old phrase. In the days ahead, we can set change into motion in all the areas we will talk about and debate here at this Conference Centre. We are the leaders; we can show the way. Let us be inspired by the power of humanity, by the difference each of us can make to promote it and for millions of people needing our help and services every day. In the words of Winston Churchill: “*Never never never give up.*”

I wish you a fruitful and successful Conference.

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