

Power of humanity

33rd International Conference
of the Red Cross and Red Crescent
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33rd International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Rapporteur's Report

Madame Chair, it is my real pleasure to present to you the official report of the conference.

More than 2,300 people have come together over the past three days – 170 states, 187 National Societies and 77 observers – a truly global engagement to discuss some of the most complex challenges our world faces.

A total of 155 statements were given during the Voices from the Conference, and 36 side events, 14 spotlight sessions and 21 RedTalks took place. Additionally, 94 pledges have been submitted, and 7 resolutions were deliberated and negotiated by the Drafting Committee under the tireless chairmanship of Ambassador Flores of Mexico. The numbers speak for themselves and represent the potential impact of our discussions.

Each day, a commission focused on one of the conference themes. On Tuesday, we explored international humanitarian law (IHL) and protecting people in armed conflict. Spotlight sessions were held on new technologies, influencing behaviour, voluntary reporting, different impacts of IHL on people and urban warfare. Participants debated a range of legal, ethical and policy challenges and identified key concepts that can help States and other actors to address them.

We saw how hard law is complemented by research, imagination, cutting-edge technology and, of course, people's action and behaviour. We heard that new technologies are constantly changing the way armed conflicts are fought. This brings new types of risks for civilians and civilian infrastructure and poses questions about whether the existing rules of IHL apply and whether new ones are needed. In many cases, this raises profound ethical questions for society and for humanity. Yet new technologies can also help limit human suffering in situations of armed conflict.

There are different sides to each of the challenges involved in ensuring better respect for IHL in today's world. Cyber warfare, autonomous weapons systems, artificial intelligence and machine learning could potentially lead to new vulnerabilities and unpredictable consequences. We also heard how armed conflicts are increasingly fought in urban areas, with devastating effects on civilians. There was discussion of new ways to influence behaviour in armed conflict and the sometimes overlooked utility of voluntary reporting and the sharing of best practices. Although violations do continue to take place, it is equally important to remember the success stories and the critical role IHL plays.

On Wednesday, the second commission focused on shifting vulnerabilities. Experts and practitioners explored the overlapping impacts of the climate and environmental crisis, persistent conflicts, the threat and challenge of epidemics and pandemics, and high levels of inequality.

Spotlight sessions drew attention to the role of volunteers in building safe and inclusive communities and in addressing the humanitarian consequences of the climate crisis, migration and internal displacement.

We heard community health volunteers and workers highlighting how important it is to promote community health delivery within national health systems and to use their knowledge in designing and delivering our response.

Panellists also underlined that the impact of climate change is already here and is a real issue for our National Societies. As always, it is the poorest and most vulnerable people who suffer the most, whether they live in conflict-affected, developing or developed countries or small island States. And one message seemed to resonate: partnerships and collaboration, especially with local governments, are key in our collective response.

We heard how, within such partnerships, both States and the Movement see an urgent need to scale up responses to the mental health and psychosocial needs of people affected by armed conflicts, natural disasters and other emergencies and how we must also “help the helpers” as our volunteers work under sometimes horrendous conditions.

As on Tuesday, many speakers highlighted the fact that, while digital technologies can improve our response and our work with affected populations, we also have a common responsibility to ensure that they are used ethically, without further exposing already vulnerable groups, to ensure nobody is left behind. This is because humanitarian action in the digital era is not about machines – it is about trust.

The spotlight session on migration highlighted how people who migrate in search of safety or better prospects often face unacceptable suffering. Too often, they are deprived of the humanitarian assistance and protection they need to ensure their safety, dignity and rights. Participants agreed that more must be done to respond to the vulnerabilities of migrants and to preserve the humanitarian space we operate in.

On Thursday, our final commission looked at trust in humanitarian action from three different perspectives: community engagement and accountability; integrity and risk sharing; and how we can create a conducive environment for principled humanitarian action.

We were reminded that trust is strengthened through continuous improvement and that robust checks and balances are needed to ensure trust.

Trust is fragile and a two-way process, which means that understanding and being close to communities is essential. We also need to improve our listening skills. Trust is the most critical currency for the future of humanitarian action. It comes from humility and being truthful and transparent.

Yesterday, we States and Movement components elected five new members of the Standing Commission. It will be their role to ensure that these discussions do not just stay here in this room. I was glad to see the election of such a diverse group of people in terms of geographical and gender balance, but despite there being two excellent young candidates on the ballot, neither was elected. Nonetheless, young people will work with the elected Commission, and I hope that, in four years' time, we continue to truly embrace diversity in all senses and position young people to make an active contribution.

Without doubt, the last few days have shaped the conversation. However, a conversation is just an exchange of words, and what we need is action, your action.

Young people fear for what our future holds. My generation has inherited some of our world's most complex challenges. And it is these challenges that will – and already are – defining our lives.

The climate crisis, mental health... it is all putting our lives at risk. We are relying on you, the leaders in this room, to show courage, to show that what we have discussed truly matters and goes beyond words. It is not about dry text in resolutions; it is about the lives of real people – and they count on us to care for them.