

Interview with Ms Fatima Gailani, President of the Afghan Red Crescent Society*

Fatima Gailani has been serving as the president of the Afghan Red Crescent Society since 2004. She is the daughter of Pir Sayed Ahmed Gailani, the leader of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan who fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan in the 1980s. After graduating from Malalai High School in Kabul, Ms Gailani obtained a BA and subsequently an MA in Persian Literature and Sufism in 1978 from the National University of Iran. She also earned an MA in Islamic Studies from the Muslim College in London in 1994. She lived in exile during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and acted as spokesperson in London for the Afghan Mujahideen. She attended the Bonne Conference on Afghanistan in 2001. After her return to Afghanistan she was chosen as a delegate to the Emergency Loya Jirga – Grand Council – of June 2002 and was appointed as a constitution drafting and ratifying commissioner. Ms Gailani is the author of two books (Mosques of London and a biography of Mohammed Mosa Shafi).

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How important do you think the humanitarian action is in Afghanistan today?

I strongly believe that the humanitarian workers in any poor country are very important. But when you think of a poor country struggling to cope with disasters, insurgencies and refugees, you can imagine how important the humanitarian factor in Afghanistan is. There are lots of times that the Afghan Red Crescent even

* The interview was conducted on 7 March 2007 by Franz Rauchenstein, deputy head of the ICRC delegation in Kabul.

has to overextend its mandate. People in Afghanistan don't understand exactly what our duties are; they need us to do more than we are actually able to. It could be argued, for example, that since there is the Afghan Ministry for Returnees and Refugees and UNHCR is present in the country, we should have nothing to do with the refugees. But when I see representatives of some refugees coming and see that they are really dying of thirst, it's impossible for me not to go and dig a well for them. So there are circumstances in which you have to save human lives, whether the action required is within your mandate or not. It is a special time for Afghanistan and that's why we are not just an ordinary National Society, we are a very special National Society.

How do you see your role as a president heading and directing such a big organization as the Afghan Red Crescent?

First of all it's a great honour. Secondly, it was my choice: I chose to come here. I have a very soft spot for the institution and knew it well, because I volunteered as a teenager. My mother and my grandmother were volunteers too. Before the war I helped them in fund-raising for the Red Crescent, so I was familiar with its work. When I arrived back in Afghanistan in 2002, after spending over two decades in exile, a new government was being established. Circumstances brought me to the National Society and I found my world at last. I am happy to be here, I think I am good at my work, I have a good team.

What prompted you to get involved with the Red Crescent?

The Red Crescent has to be within your heart, otherwise you cannot achieve anything. It is like being a poet ... if you do not have the passion for it within you, you cannot write poetry. We have to carry out our work with 100 per cent impartiality, neutrality and commitment.

Working in the Red Crescent is very demanding. Afghanistan is a country prone to disasters. We have to deal with floods, droughts, earthquakes, war and insurgencies all at the same time. We have to run from one side of the country to the other in order to do so. As head of this organization, the words "I am tired" should not be part of my vocabulary. I am very determined to put over this message to all my colleagues.

I think that it is a noble task we have to do, and that the Red Crescent has a bright future in a country we are going to rebuild. I never underestimated the pressure of work here, or anywhere in Afghanistan. I have to be realistic. But you have your dream and then you do your best to fulfil it. How far you succeed depends on circumstances. It is in the hand of God.

I thought I could make a contribution by working with the Red Crescent. Besides its regular work as a National Society, it includes a little of everything – education of orphans, care for old people, clinics for orphans and poor people, welfare. Every day I think of a new programme for a different section: how can I get women involved, help them become self-sufficient, have jobs? I have a dream for the women of Afghanistan and this is something I can contribute to.

You are president of an important organization in a country where some years ago women were not allowed to work outside their homes and where they still play a minor role in the official structures.

I am not the first woman in this National Society. I had a predecessor who was also a woman, Soraya Parluka. It was during the Soviet era, in which entirely different circumstances prevailed.

Today Islamic feeling has become much stronger in this country. You might think that it should be difficult for a woman to work in this National Society. For me, on the contrary, it helps me more. Just yesterday I had a meeting with a member of parliament who belongs to a very hardline Islamist party, but he came here, gave us lots of compliments about our neutrality and said he is very happy that a woman heads this organization. He said he often had heard male members of parliament, who used to be *Mujahideen* themselves, comment that one of the reasons that the National Society is doing so well is because the president is a woman. I hope that is the case. But I think there isn't any difference between men and women; it's really the competence which counts.

What challenges do women, including you, face in Afghan society today?

In most parts of the country women face exactly the same discrimination they faced five years ago. This discrimination does not come from the government; it comes from their own families. Personally, I never think about my gender, whether I am in the Red Crescent or when I was recently working on the new Constitution. I had to go from village to village to speak to different people, sitting in the mosque talking to a congregation of men. I think that when you reach a certain level of education, people will respect you. But the dilemma is how to encourage fathers, brothers and families to give this chance to their daughters. Whenever I get compliments from men from various tribes, I reply to them by saying, "If you want your daughter to be like me, then you have to give her the same opportunities that my father gave me."

Is the role of women in Afghan society evolving?

We cannot achieve peace, human rights, women's rights or democracy with imported rules and regulations. It wouldn't be sensible. The presence of foreigners, of foreign troops, the influence of the UN, can temporarily bring changes for women. But are these changes really fundamental? Do they have roots in our society and our culture? I do not think so. That's why I insist upon an Afghan solution, which means involving religious and tribal leaders and ordinary village people. In order to establish an Afghan feminism, we have to involve our own religion and culture.

You would not believe the things that are occurring to improve the status of women, to improve their situation and create opportunities for them to make permanent changes for themselves. Despite the fact that the funds haven't been released and conditions have not changed as much as I expected, I see the great amount of hope these women feel, and I am overwhelmed. These people have been through sheer hell over the last twenty-four years and still have so much hope. Actually, they still find life wonderful when they take light from their hope and

make everything glow. When they see people like me or people who have had a prosperous life in the West choose to live in Afghanistan, it is a big event for them. How could I leave these women who expect so much from me? They set aside every hurtful incident and transform it into hope. I'm talking about every kind of woman, not just doctors or women who work in the Red Crescent Society. For example, because I don't have a washing machine, I hired a woman to wash for me. She is the most delightful person; she doesn't have one grain of pessimism in her mind or body. She is a widow and has three children, and with every step she takes she has such hope. She says that just to be hired by me makes her happy "because I meet so many women here". After listening to my conversation with women, this washerwoman would talk to me about how similar her dreams and theirs are. She would say, "I'm an illiterate woman and these people are highly educated, but we have the same dreams." And she made me see it.

Is it easy nowadays to find good and motivated volunteers? Is the idea of voluntary work for the Red Cross still very valid at the present time, when it is difficult to find jobs and make a living?

I'm proud to say that we have nearly 37,000 volunteers. They exist in every part of our country and this is a huge asset for us, which makes us different from other humanitarian agencies. They are very committed and have been doing this work for a long time, long before I came to this National Society. They were providing assistance during the war. I always say that that if people can be recruited to go and blow themselves up with bombs, it would be very disappointing for me if I can't recruit people who would go and risk their lives to help others. The other aspect that has helped us a lot in attracting young volunteers is our sports. Now we have our own volley ball, ping pong and tae kwon do teams, and some of them are either number one or number two nationwide, even girls. Sport is one thing that attracts volunteers very much and I hope to be able to get some money and start youth clubs in every province. If we have youth clubs then people could also come to learn other skills, like computers, languages and so on.

What are your plans for the Afghan Red Crescent? Do you wish to bring more women into the National Society?

Absolutely, we need to bring more women into the Red Crescent. We have started recruiting girls and training them, giving them a basic knowledge of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement while improving their language and organizational skills. If this scheme is successful, we will take on even more girls. By the end of my term in office, it would be great to have a good percentage of women working in this National Society.

The number of women in the Red Crescent is low, especially at headquarters, but the low level of education among the women in this National Society was also shocking to me. With the exception of some women, the level of competence was not acceptable. That's why we have started a new scheme. We hire young competent women. We teach them how to work and how to be a member of a Red Crescent Society with our management, our laws and regulations, computers,

languages and all that. Then slowly we release them within the system. Maybe some will leave us. But new people are constantly coming and I am trying in particular to bring in more women. Not just because I am a woman and the new world policy is that women should be in the workplace and should be seen. I am doing this because the number of women genuinely is very low here, and not as a woman, but because it is my duty as a leader of this institution to do something about it.

In the cities we have more women, very dedicated ones, and we encourage women to join us with our activities in remoter areas too. But the proportion of female volunteers is much better than that of the female employees we have. I'm not sure our team will ever be completely gender-balanced or if it needs to be. The percentage of educated girls in Afghanistan is lower than that of educated boys, so I am not sure whether creating an artificial work environment, with a 50–50 male-to-female ratio, would work or be sustainable. If we did this, we would also be dismissing some eligible male candidates just for the sake of only recruiting women. The bottom line is that we have to recruit capable people, the best people for the job. If I have to compromise on the quality of these people, I'm not going to do that. And they can stay in the system only when they are really good. But instead of these youngsters being male, priority will where possible be given to young women.

Who are the most vulnerable people in Afghanistan and how is the Red Crescent assisting them?

Some of the most vulnerable are disabled parents, people who are mentally challenged because of the war and the young widows. But in a country that has experienced twenty-four years of war, in a country that faces all kinds of disasters, you have too many vulnerable people. If we were to sit down and try to count, I'd say 60 per cent of this country's population is vulnerable. It is not humanly possible to provide help to more than half a country.

So what is your objective in this sea of needs?

My hope is that, one day, we will be able to say that we managed to help some of the most vulnerable people by bringing them into Red Crescent homes for the destitute, known as *marastoon*. I want to give them some hope, not only in their hearts but in their minds as well. Children living in *marastoon* are given free education and they can learn a vocational trade, like tailoring or carpet weaving. If we manage to offer some hope to these children, then their parents will have less to worry about since their children will be more independent. We're working to help them become reintegrated into society and live healthy lives. If we manage to do this for the people in the *marastoon*, I think we've done well.

We take care of vulnerable women too in the *marastoon*. They are usually young widows or women who have lost a limb or lost their sight during the war. Even worse, we have women who have lost their minds during the war. There are lots of aged women in the streets, but only because they are aged and have nowhere to live, for instance when their families are dead or missing. I hope that one day I will have enough space in *marastoon* to house them there. For the time being we have neither the ability to increase it nor the facilities to do so. We are in

discussion with the United Arab Emirates Red Crescent, and they are going to help us. In addition, we are running programmes jointly with the ICRC and the International Federation. We teach sewing, embroidery and many other skills for women and give food in exchange for the work done. I hope that one day I shall be able to expand such programmes as well, to teach them to be a skilled chef, a skilled confectioner, so that they can set up a little shop or catering business in their homes. This will be in the future.

What are the main activities of the Afghan Red Crescent today?

Throughout the last 73 years the Afghan Red Crescent Society has had a very special role in the life of the Afghan people. We are in a postwar situation, and war is still going on in some areas of Afghanistan. With all the natural and not so natural disasters, the Society has a very important role to play.

We are not lucky enough to be selective in what we do. Others might have the luck or the privilege to choose their activities and determine their scope. It may be very focused and narrow, and that's why they are so good at what they do. Unfortunately we have to carry out lots of activities in parallel, be it health care, assistance to displaced persons, disaster management, first aid, the fight against discrimination, tracing missing persons or just looking after poor people. Some of these activities fall outside the mandate of many national Red Cross or Red Crescent societies in the world, but we still have to meet those needs because nobody else does. At the same time, with the unfortunate situation of war still going on in some parts of the country, we have to carry on with our essential activities.

Do you have access to the areas affected by war?

We are now providing support with the help of the ICRC to sixteen branches in sensitive conflict areas, in particular through community-based first aid. We have trained about 11,000 volunteers in first aid. The International Federation, within a wholesale Movement approach, continues to support the remaining branches. This network is perceived as a key element of ongoing efforts to ensure that the entire Movement has access to as broad a territory as possible, while providing an invaluable humanitarian service.

Not to forget the returnees and refugees: they are in a special situation and we have to take care of it. Expectations of the Afghan National Society are so high that we are sometimes overwhelmed and don't know how to respond to them, but nevertheless, with the help of our two international partners, the ICRC and the International Federation of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, we have coped.

What are your short-term and medium-term priorities in your present role?

Apart from the regular work we have to do, which I explained earlier, my main focus is on capacity-building of the people who work in this institution. No matter how perfect the leadership of a National Society may be, it cannot succeed without a team capable of carrying out these activities efficiently. This is the priority task that I try very hard to accomplish – to help build up the capacity of the Afghan Red Crescent.

Have your role and your activities changed, if you compare the present situation with the role of the Afghan Red Crescent during the Soviet occupation or the Taliban regime?

I was not in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation or the *Mujahideen* government, nor during the Taliban regime. But if I compare the National Society today to prewar times when I was a volunteer here in the same premises that we are sitting in today, it has changed tremendously. That was during peacetime: we never had so many wounded or limbless people or so many poor or mentally disturbed people as we have today. We didn't even have national disasters such as those that have resulted from so many trees being cut down during the war. There has been a huge change. During the Communist era many people were in refugee camps, and during some of the time of the *Mujahideen* the country was split in pieces, as it was under the Taliban regime. So the centre was looking after or catering only for some provinces. Millions of people hadn't returned, and most of these limbless people were out of the country. Today our volunteers see floods, earthquakes, avalanches, war, refugees, wounded and poor people – whatever you may imagine, we have it here. And we have to be prepared for all this.

How is your relationship with the Afghan authorities?

I have to be frank, it was not an easy task. For me it is very encouraging when I meet and talk with my other colleagues to hear that they have the same problem, even those from Western countries. The National Society has a special role in their country, and the meaning of auxiliary and independence is sometimes misunderstood even in countries which for some time have had a normal life and a normal situation. Here, I had no problems at the upper level of the government. They are competent people and some are highly educated; they understand what the auxiliary role is. But at a lower level, when out in the provinces and working with some of the governors and heads of the districts, we have huge problems: they see us as part of the government and are inclined to deal with us as such.

For the past year, and especially the last few months, we have had great success in this regard. The President himself and the Cabinet have declared on the radio and confirmed by various decrees that the neutrality and independence of the National Society are accepted, and have instructed all the provinces that they must respect this status. Sometimes we have come up against similar problems with the provincial reconstruction teams, which combine military personnel and civilian staff.[†] Contrary to my expectations the American and European soldiers in the teams, except for those of a few northern European countries, have not always understood our role. But today, with the help of the ICRC, this has also been solved. Furthermore, we have a new constitution clearly spelling out our neutrality and independence, which is signed by the President and ensured by decrees. I

[†] A provincial reconstruction team is an administrative unit of internationals, consisting of a small operating base from which a group of civilians and military specialists work to perform small reconstruction projects or provide security for others involved in aid and reconstruction work.

think that never before in the history of Afghanistan has the neutrality of our National Society been as important as it is today.

As conflict still prevails in many parts of the country, is the Afghan Red Crescent Society accepted by all groups involved when providing assistance?

Whenever I talk about the subject, I am scared that the situation may change. Yes, we have kept our neutrality and our neutrality has been accepted and recognized until today even by anti-governmental movements. I don't know what will happen tomorrow. Our aim is to help people. If you say this only in words, it doesn't help: you just have slogans. You have to prove your neutrality and impartiality in the field. And I think we did prove it. I have tried very hard in my everyday life and my actions to uphold neutrality and avoid engaging in controversies of a political, religious or ideological nature. When I do this as president of the Afghan Red Crescent, then it is normal for the rest of us to do this too.

We are now operating in those areas which are totally out of the government's reach. Our volunteers are helping the wounded and collecting the dead for both sides. I would like to give my assurance to all that I will do everything in my power in order to preserve our neutrality and impartiality. Until now I have had no problem, but again I touch wood and again I say, thank God! Respect for neutrality is the main challenge for the Red Crescent, and we abstain entirely from engaging in politics and related controversies. One has to be very, very careful about that. If you jeopardize the neutrality of a National Society, you cannot do your work at all.

How do you face security problems in your operations? Do you feel safe to operate outside urban areas, for example?

You see ministers with all these cars and guns following them and surrounding them in the street. As you know, I don't have a guard, I don't have bodyguards, I don't have any weapons around me. I haven't felt uncomfortable up to now, and I hope that my volunteers and my mobile teams far away in the provinces have the same feeling. Neutrality cannot be maintained by the National Society on its own; the rest should also respect it. When I pledge to maintain the 100 per cent neutrality of the National Society, then my expectation is that all others, including the anti-government movements, should respect this.

But to tell you the truth, I don't think about it much. In countries like Afghanistan, if you think too logically, then I shouldn't have come back. I had a comfortable life, I could earn very well before coming to Afghanistan. Logically speaking, why did I come back? But I came back. I have to take the consequences, and also I hope for the best, I work for the best, I try for the best. The rest of it is in the hand of God.

Can the volunteers move freely in the field, or are they also restricted in their movements and unable to carry out their programmes and operations?

Until now, thank God, they are not only fulfilling their duties but they are doing very well. We actually have our volunteers in the Helmand area, where there is war

between the government and non-government movements, and they are not threatened there. Even in those areas where the doctors cannot go, our mobile teams are very active. That is beyond their usual duty. What will happen tomorrow is very difficult to say in countries like Afghanistan.

The security situation remains very dangerous in Afghanistan. How are women and children affected by the ongoing violence and has this instability had an impact on the work of the Red Crescent?

Although everyone is affected by this difficult situation, we continue to perform well in the face of a harsh and unstable social, political and economic environment. It is very important for me and my colleagues to keep the neutrality of the National Society intact. Unfortunately, women and children are the first victims to suffer the consequences of an armed conflict. So we try very hard to take care of women and children and give them special treatment. One of the National Society's focal activities is health. Under our health-care programme, we run clinics that have mother and child facilities. The clinics also offer family planning sessions to help women space out their children between births.

There is a massive security set-up for expatriates here, including humanitarian personnel, which makes it difficult to take up contact with the Afghan population.

It is very sad for me to see this. I feel bad that people who have come to help us have to live in barracks and have to live the way they do today. It's particularly sad for me that life for people within the cities has become very difficult. Most of the roads are closed. It's even tougher for the Afghans because of all these barracks, road closures and difficulties of access. On the other hand, we have so many soldiers from so many countries, and every day a head of state, a prime minister and members of parliament come and say hello to them. We have lots of visitors and it could be good for us, as they could see what's going on in Afghanistan – if only they would go and see it, but they don't. They come to the airport, they close the road, they go and see their soldiers, and then they fly back. How will they know what is going on in our country? How will they see how horrible it becomes when it rains? How will they see that inside the city we still have refugee camps?

The needs are overwhelming in Afghanistan. There are many humanitarian organizations operating in Afghanistan and even military personnel are distributing humanitarian assistance. Are your operations and your security affected if humanitarian aid is handed out today by military forces and tomorrow by NGOs and by the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement? Isn't that a bit ...

Mixed up? Yes. That was particularly the case a few months ago, say six months ago. That's why we made it very clear that our logo and emblem have to be very clearly visible. Our volunteers will have to have their uniforms. Sometimes they wouldn't bother to wear them. Now we emphasize that their uniforms have to be worn. And we make sure that the items in our warehouses have to come either

from totally neutral countries or especially from Islamic countries, if we want our assistance to be welcomed in some areas. Or it should come specifically from Red Cross or Red Crescent sources. Don't forget that war in Afghanistan, unfortunately, has been going on for the last twenty-nine years, so people are familiar with the emblems. We should be very careful about this. We should not allow others to use the red cross or red crescent emblem on their cars. For greater security we have asked to be given special number plates, so hopefully in a few months we will have our own special number plates with our emblem on them. I thought this was my idea, but when I went to Lebanon I saw they are also doing that. I immediately took some pictures and brought them here to show the Ministry of the Interior. If we use government number plates, how can we claim that we are neutral? If we use ordinary number plates, then anyone can just go and put our emblem on their cars, which would also create problems. However, it is impossible, or at least very difficult, to copy the special number plates because they are registered. We all know where they are, so we have more control over the movements of our cars and our people. The government has given permission. Now the logistic procedure is under way. Hopefully we shall soon have the special number plates. That will make our life much easier.

How are the relations between your humanitarian action and the international forces?

Sometimes we do have problems. Some armies have their own humanitarian work, with units like the provincial reconstruction teams. They are mending and building roads, building bridges, building wells. They are refurbishing clinics and hospitals and schools, or even building them from scratch. Let them do what they can. But they possibly also engage in military operations, blurring the lines between humanitarian and military action. Because of our volunteers, who come from every village, every province, every district, we can reach the remote areas. Often, the military take it for granted that we should help them distribute the food or medicine or whatever they have. It's hard for them to understand that we cannot do so. We have to maintain our neutrality. I was a bit shocked because I thought that since the provincial reconstruction teams mostly come from very sophisticated countries, they should know this separation of tasks. But then I realized they haven't seen war, thank God. They don't understand the finesse required. Eventually, when you explain the problems to them, they do understand and they respect our independence.

You mentioned before that the neutrality of the Afghan Red Crescent is recognized by the various parties today in Afghanistan. Do you think that today the humanitarian action as such in Afghanistan is neutral and impartial?

I hope it is, and I hope that other humanitarian players also keep up their neutrality and impartiality in their actions. When it comes to charity work or humanitarian work, I think these principles are essential whoever is doing that work. But when it comes to a National Society, they are absolutely vital. This is

what makes us different from the rest of the players. There are much richer organizations. But what makes us more important and more special are the ideals and the reason which gave rise to the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement. We have only one National Society in each country, firmly anchored in the cultural and religious setting, but all the National Societies worldwide are linked to each other within a federation. And when war and armed conflict break out in a country, we have another partner, the ICRC, which immediately steps in to help us. This makes us such a different family, and we have to keep and develop these ideals and this strength.

How do you see the role and activities of the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement today in Afghanistan?

We command great respect from society and the authorities, not only for the work of the Afghan Red Crescent, but for the work of the Movement in general. It is the way we understand our mandate, our responsibility towards each other, the way we work together and co-operate with each other. We have bilateral meetings, we have tripartite meetings. We jointly meet people from the other provinces. We don't have schedules because of the situation. It goes beyond a schedule. We should be proud of all this and we should continue our good work.

I'll tell you a little story. I lived in an area where I don't live any more. There was a car parked in front of my house, a white car with a crescent and a cross on it, very similar to the emblem of the International Federation. I thought it was one of their old cars. I knocked on the door and asked the man, "Why do you have this car?" He answered that there were cars with crosses and crescents coming, some had a red cross, some had a red crescent, and said that "people loved them so much, I thought I'll put it on my own car". For me it was very difficult to tell him that, well, actually, he was not allowed to do so, despite his affection. People respect us very much and I think it is not just for my work or our work in the Afghan Red Crescent Society, but it is really for the work of the Movement as a whole.

Humanitarian assistance today is being provided by various international agencies? Do you see this as a problem or rather as enrichment?

It depends. Sometimes, when the situation is so bad that it's beyond one's control, of course you welcome others to play their role and to fulfil their duties. But when it comes to everyday work, yes, sometimes it does create problems. It creates problems, for example, because here we have an old and experienced National Society with very strong roots in the community all over Afghanistan, but apart from the help we get from the other National Societies and from some Arab countries, again through their National Society, we don't get any help from outside. I'm sure that if some of the amount of money which comes to this country could come to the National Society, we could, with the number of volunteers we have, get help to people a lot more cheaply. And with the network the National Society has, it would have been much easier for us to do so. We get hardly any funds from big donors. The laws and regulations of the various

countries state that they can give some percentage to the government and that some percentage has to go to non-governmental organizations, but they totally forget about the National Society. So those donors forget that a National Society could receive some of this help, especially the humanitarian part of it. Our special status – we are not really an NGO and we are not really governmental – helps us to do things much more easily and openly. But when it comes to attracting funds, it makes things difficult for us because the government, the donors, don't regard us as an NGO. When I see that most of the aid goes to the NGOs, with the extraordinary salaries that they pay and the luxurious way they live, I think we would have distributed it in a much more efficient way. Yes, sometimes it does create problems, and maybe jealousy.

What is the role of specific NGOs, including religious organizations, in this country?

There are numerous NGOs working in Afghanistan, some are doing good work, some are not. I don't like missionary work under the mantle of humanitarian work. For me it is not work in the service of humanity; it is giving bribes and exploiting the situation. This is my nature: whether a victim is Muslim or Christian, I don't care. When an organization does humanitarian work in the name of Christianity or in the name of Islam, and when it brings help according to the need of the victims without any discrimination and doesn't want to sell its ideology, then that's fine by me. But I have seen many cases, especially during the Taliban rule, of people speaking and trying to convert people to Christianity. I think it would be very arrogant of an organization to say that now I will make you a whole human being, you haven't been a whole human being until now. That's the kind of arrogance I can't stand!

How do you see the role of the UN and its agencies?

Most of the activities they carry out are appreciated and well done. But the work of the UN has always been very expensive work. This is the way it operates. But I do not see any alternative for the United Nations as such.

Is the help, the aid, the assistance focused and well thought out or should the co-ordination be better? Are there co-ordinating bodies here and is that co-ordination work done efficiently?

The humanitarian assistance could be better co-ordinated, but it's not that bad. In some places we work together very well, but when it comes to the non-conflict areas, I prefer not to have this partnership with some humanitarian players because today our impartiality in helping there is much more important than getting more and more assistance. In the north of the country, if other agencies seek our help, we will be happy to co-operate with them. And again, I'm saying that because of the presence of a huge number of our volunteers, we have to help, otherwise it is very expensive and sometimes impossible for those agencies to provide assistance on their own.

We must not get in each other's way, we must not compete with each other. Instead, we should complement each other. The role of a National Society is in the middle: on one side we have the government, on the other side we have the NGOs, and the government should understand that special place and the special role the National Society should play. With due respect for each other, with co-operation by complementing each other, we could bring about a better and brighter future for Afghanistan.

With regard to Afghanistan's long-term development, what is needed to take the country forward?

In Afghanistan, we have different languages, different ethnic groups and different religious groups. We all have to recognize that – no matter what language we speak, no matter what ethnic group we belong to, what religion we have – we are all Afghans, we owe it to Afghanistan to rebuild this country and we should immediately stop our negative competition and animosity. Every leader of this country has this responsibility. It was not the ordinary, illiterate people who started the wars, it was the elite, and it is now their duty to bring those people together and create a future for Afghanistan, so that we can all have equal rights, we can all have equal possibilities to face the future. It is especially the role of people who had the privilege of living outside, learning more, having a comfortable life, like me. We have to pay back for that privilege, and we have to be sincere to this country. And there is corruption, one of the biggest problems of this country. If we don't get rid of corruption here, I don't think we can succeed.

Might your country become dependent on humanitarian aid?

It is already dependent on humanitarian aid and one of my complaints, not within the National Society but in the country, is that programmes should have been introduced to make people self-sufficient. By now five years have passed and we should have some factories, fruit farms, flower exports and suchlike. It's my big disappointment that our foreign donors didn't even think about that. Within the National Society we do have programmes to help people become self-reliant. For instance, we plan to set up a culinary school in an adjoining building at the moment occupied by refugees. There is a huge shortage of good chefs, good cooks and trained waiters. With all these hotels coming up I think it will be a wonderful place to train such people, then they could work there and slowly reimburse the cost.

Are you frustrated that more economic, political and social progress hasn't been made over the past five years?

Yes and no. I've stopped worrying about it. The first two years I used to worry when I saw any child out of school, any person without a job, any beggar in the street. I felt bad, as though it was my fault. I kept on feeling guilty. Now, of course, I feel sad about it. I've never allowed myself to be indifferent, but I've reconciled myself to doing what I can in my capacity as president of the Red Crescent to help

vulnerable people and fight corruption. We have an exceptionally good National Society here. Potentially it has everything: it has wealth in terms of human resources, it has respect, which it used to have before the war and we have to restore it. I have done this to some extent, but we have to continue to do so with your help. I think that this is potentially a very important National Society in what will probably be a very poor country for a long, long time, and that we should all be committed to supporting it. So we should recognize the importance of its role. I need help from every person in every part of the Movement, be it the ICRC, the International Federation or the various national Red Cross and Red Crescent societies. I need the help of everyone who could assist me in rebuilding it physically, rebuilding it by capacity-training my employees, by training my volunteers, by giving help so that we ourselves can help the most vulnerable persons in Afghanistan. I think it will be a tremendous gift for Afghanistan if we can rebuild this National Society.