

## Conference endorses draft RFL Strategy



*Representatives of 34 National Societies, the Federation and the ICRC meet in Bangkok to chart the future of RFL activities in Asia, the Pacific and the Middle East*

Participants at the Regional Restoring Family Links (RFL) Conference for Asia, the Middle East and the Pacific endorsed in principle the draft Strategy at the core of the debate over the past three days. The 34 National Societies gathered in Bangkok, as well as the Federation and the ICRC underlined the importance of RFL activities and expressed their commitment to the proposed way ahead. However, the meeting asked the ICRC to take note of the comments and issues raised during the conference before finalizing the RFL Strategy.

### Defining the challenge

The final day of the meeting started with the presentation of the conference report, which outlined the key challenges identified by the participants during the working group debates on the second day. There was consensus that all components of the Movement have to work together to ensure that the plight of separated families is not forgotten and that effective steps are taken to support them. While acknowledging the general coordination function of the ICRC concerning RFL issues, participants felt the

organization's lead role ought to be further clarified. They also called on the Federation to play an active part in the implementation of the RFL strategy.

Some of the most concrete proposals raised at the meeting concerned the key responsibility of National Societies for RFL services. It was felt that they should strive for more ownership of RFL services, integrating them within the broader range of humanitarian activities, particularly disaster preparedness and response. This in turn requires more training and management capacities both at headquarter and branch level as well as additional resources. Concerning the last point, the conference endorsed a suggestion to establish a special financing mechanism to strengthen the long-term development of RFL activities. The final report also paid tribute to the contribution made by volunteers to help separated families in the region.

### A regional commitment

RFL needs vary across Asia, the Middle East and the Pacific. The Movement faces the challenge of effectively aiding people with widely differing

needs including families forced to leave their homes because of armed conflict or natural disasters, migrants, relatives separated by closed borders, and detainees. Participants stressed that as a result the pace of implementation of the Strategy will vary among National Societies and between regions and sub-regions.

The Conference repeatedly drew attention to the potential synergies that could be realized if National Societies improved their cooperation on RFL issues. They supported the development of regional and sub-regional focal points, proposing that National Societies with the necessary know-how and funding should join forces with the ICRC to build capacity and strengthen the regional RFL response.



*Graham Wrigley, Acting Director General of the New Zealand Red Cross and conference chairman Eric Roethlisberger, honorary member of the ICRC. The New Zealand Red Cross funded the Bangkok regional conference.*

### Looking beyond the Movement

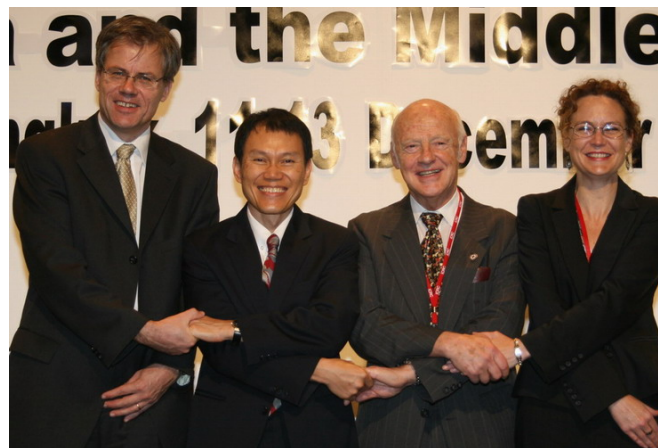
The conference repeatedly highlighted the challenges and opportunities RFL activities present in this region. It was strongly felt that the Movement cannot act alone but needs to develop strong relations with other concerned stakeholders: national authorities should be made aware of and support the RFL role of the Movement while the media should be encouraged to cover the issue to mobilize the support of the general public. Finally, participants made it clear that the Family Links Network cannot and should not operate in isolation from civil society organizations and private businesses involved in RFL work.

### From strategy to action

The final conference report also drew attention to the fact that successful RFL work can be used to strengthen the Movement's image.

The final conference report clearly recognises that the success – or failure - of the RFL strategy depends on the extent to which it produces real and tangible benefits for the thousands of families looking to re-establish contact with their loved ones. Aware of this, participants asked for the Strategy to be backed up by a clear implementation plan including information on the timeframe, priorities, human and financial resources needed and the dissemination of the strategy. Again, they stressed the need for the plan to define the responsibility of each Movement component, emphasizing that National Societies ought to be involved at every stage of the process.

To close the meeting, participants commended the ICRC and the Advisory Group for their work and recommended that the RFL Strategy for the Movement be presented to the Council of Delegates next year for adoption.



*From right to left: Head of RFL Project, Jane Clarke; Eric Roethlisberger; Dr Weerasit Sittitra, Director, Thai Red Cross; Alain Aeschlimann, Head of the Central Tracing Agency.*