
Keynote address by H.R.H. Princess Margriet, Chairwoman of the Standing Commission

It is an honour and a great pleasure for me to welcome you on behalf of the Standing Commission to the 28th International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent. I am delighted to see so many participants gathered here this evening. It is of particular value and importance at a time when we live in a polarized, anxious world with so much suffering. A troubled world far removed from the high humanitarian ideals of Henry Dunant, the founder of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

We are here to make a difference to the lives of persons affected by armed conflicts, disasters and diseases. I should like to thank the Swiss authorities most sincerely for their unstinting support in making this Conference a reality and for hosting us so generously.

The International Conference is a unique forum. The Movement has this exclusive privilege to come together with our governments on matters high on the humanitarian agenda. The Standing Commission is the trustee of the International Conference between two Conferences tasked with preparing the Conference. When the Standing Commission mandated the ICRC and the International Federation to host the 28th Conference in Geneva, we were acutely aware that it would take place in an uncertain world situation.

The challenges we face in our day-to-day work, at home and internationally, can only be tackled with the co-operation of governments and the responsibility they take in caring for their citizens. This is why this Conference is so very important. In 1999 our motto was 'the power of humanity'. This time we convene under the banner of 'Protecting Human Dignity'. We have the power of humanity to protect human dignity. This Conference is not about words. It is about much needed action. Our relevance will be judged by the difference we make. It is up to us, the Movement and governments, to show the world, that we do not want to be perceived as being more comfortable with present problems than with new solutions.

Every day the headlines in the media show us the great need to protect human dignity in situations of armed conflict and in situations of disaster and disease. Also the messages in the video were clear and powerful.

On *armed conflict* we heard “Protecting Human Dignity in conflict requires an unequivocal commitment from states and armed groups to *respect and ensure respect* for international humanitarian law”. And: “No state is above the law. No person falls outside the protection of the law.”

On *disasters and diseases* we heard “Disasters bring devastation everywhere. The poorer you are, the harder they hit. And... AIDS is changing everything. We are facing a new type of disaster in which AIDS, vulnerability, hunger and chronic poverty create a vicious circle.”

These messages are stark reminders of a grim reality. A reminder to bring the reality from the field into our deliberations, as we are about to embark on our important work.

The Red Cross and Red Crescent work with and for people. Our purpose is to *care*, to take care of the victims of wars, disasters and disease. A purpose that we *share* with our external partners. To enhance our performance and live up to the expectations of the victims we *dare* to go that extra mile.

When preparing this Conference, we asked National Societies and governments for their advice regarding the issues that should be on the agenda. There were many. There was wide agreement to have international humanitarian law high on the agenda. Clearly this was sparked by recent developments and numerous tragic events.

The Declaration addresses topical humanitarian concerns. In the draft Agenda for Humanitarian Action, four main issues stand out: missing persons, weapons, disasters and diseases.

To start with, the question of *missing persons*. The immense suffering of not knowing what happened to your loved ones is beyond words. The continuing uncertainty and the feelings of injustice and resentment keep open the emotional wounds of war and shatter hopes of reconciliation. What can we do about this? The Movement has a traditional role in tracing. The ICRC, with the help of National Societies, plays an essential role in tracing. We need to overcome the sometimes quite evident lack of political will to resolve this deeply humanitarian concern.

We will also discuss *weapons*. We will reflect on the human costs of the availability, use and misuse of weapons. While in the past 90% of the victims were military servicemen, nowadays 90% of the victims are civilians — innocent children, men and women. How can we better protect civilians

from the indiscriminate effects and use of weapons? We just heard that in many parts of the world it is easier to arm oneself than to feed oneself. Together with governments, significant progress has been made although much work remains.

The third area of focus is *disasters*. How can we minimize the impact of disasters, reduce risks and improve our preparedness and response? How can we empower the people in disaster-prone regions? We can build on the strength of victims and beneficiaries. Our Movement has a history of demonstrating the power of humanity. Emergency response goes hand in hand with the efforts to help the victims recover from crises and to be better prepared for unexpected vulnerability. An integrated approach to disaster risk reduction is necessary to effectively minimize the impact of disasters on vulnerable populations.

Disease is the fourth and last key issue. How can we reduce vulnerability to disease arising from stigma and discrimination? AIDS represents a tragedy of unprecedented proportions, affecting millions across the globe. AIDS, vulnerability, hunger and chronic poverty form a vicious circle. Discrimination and stigma further widen this vicious circle. We have to analyse our own attitudes to credibly promote tolerance and respect for diversity in all its richness. Change begins at home.

We must remember the nameless, faceless and voiceless in our deliberations. How? By reinforcing respect for humanitarian law and by developing sustainable solutions to humanitarian challenges. Through dialogue, listening to one another, respecting diversity. By putting our words into action. To this end I encourage you to make a pledge, individually or together with others. This is a way to translate the goodwill of Conference members into concrete commitments.

National Societies are auxiliaries to the public authorities. They are also independent humanitarian actors, bound by the Fundamental Principles defined in our Statutes. Governments are our partners in both our national and international work. Partnership is the key to greater results, at home and in the field. Immediately when a disaster strikes, the National Red Cross or Red Crescent Society is there, on the ground, with its staff and volunteers and partners. It remains there when all others have left. No matter how efficient we are internationally, it is the role of those on the spot to be in charge during the first crucial hours. It is therefore essential that National Societies have the capacity to act and deliver. And that there are clear agreements on who does what in such situations. Only then can we empower vulnerable populations.

We are present — everywhere. We are a global network reaching out to all corners of the world. We form the chain of humanity. We deliver impartial help. We don't take sides. We side with the victims. Our everyday work is evidence of how we implement our mission, which is to alleviate human suffering wherever it may be found. Our staff and volunteers the world over act and live our fundamental principles. There is wide public awareness of the Movement's presence and involvement in conflicts, crises and emergencies. We also hope for better awareness of and adherence to the provisions of international humanitarian law.

With attention comes expectation, and threats — as we have recently and very painfully experienced. The emblems symbolising neutral protection and assistance have become vulnerable themselves. How can our humanitarian workers carry out their mission in a security environment when our most basic operations are under threat? This is a challenge to our first and foremost mission: to be where the victims are. We must somehow face this challenge. If we fail, access to humanitarian assistance will be at risk. And the victims and the beneficiaries will lose out. We cannot allow this to happen. Mr Mandela once said that 'the Red Cross was a beacon of humanity within the dark inhumane world of political imprisonment'.

I feel confident that this Conference will add its significant marks towards building our collective future. There is hope. Suffering and misery are not unavoidable. Solutions do exist. This Conference can send a strong message to the world on the protection of human dignity. Together we can make a difference to the lives of persons affected by armed conflicts, disasters and diseases. We owe this to the victims. But our commitment must go beyond a message, beyond documents, and lead to immediate action. We must be bold, creative and decisive. The expectations are high. In the days ahead, let the voices of the victims and the voices of hope echo in our minds. Let their voices echo here and around the world.