

H.E. Dr. Mohammed Al Hadid

**Chairman of the Standing Commission
of the Red Cross and Red Crescent**

**Opening of the
General Assembly of the Organisation of
Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Societies**

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It is a pleasure for me to again participate at this General Assembly of Arab Red Crescent and Red Cross Societies. This important meeting allows us to sum up our work and achievements since we met in Doha and to discuss how best to address new and grave challenges ahead, based on the outcomes of the International Conference and the Council of Delegates last November. Our main mission, to alleviate suffering based on our Fundamental Principles and humanitarian values, has not and will not change. But looking around, especially in our region, there are no signs of diminishing needs and it is getting increasingly difficult to reach the vulnerable in need of our assistance.

After our meeting in Doha, we focused much of our work on future humanitarian concerns when preparing for the Council and the International Conference. We set out to analyze the consequences of some of the most pressing global challenges of our time on the well-being and livelihoods of especially the most vulnerable populations. We have also brought to a close work on major Movement issues, which I shall shortly revert to.

At the same time, in our region – sadly – concerns about people displaced by the Iraqi conflict and about the human misery created by the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict could not be dismissed. It looks like we are trapped in ever continuing wars with no light at the end of the tunnel. In spite of expectations raised in June 2006 within the Movement about confidence-building change through the implementation of the MoU between the MDA and PRCS, which also are closest affected by the conflict, we did not see the anticipated progress. That agreement was originally a symbol of hope: humanitarian concerns prevailing over political interests during conflict and occupation. Both the Council and the Conference called on all parties involved, including the authorities, to support full implementation of the MoU. The independent monitor, Mr Pär Stenbäck, continues in his role and prepares his report by end of May this year. That will be the first opportunity also for the Standing Commission to take stock of possible progress made since the meetings in November and to consider any further action that might be called for.

In the meantime, events in Gaza have again reached crisis-level and we are witnessing unacceptable death and suffering among civilians, including women and children. As members of the RCRC Movement, we have to continuously reiterate that under international humanitarian law, indiscriminate attacks against civilians are never allowed. Constant care must be taken to spare the civilian population, and *all* concerned parties must at all times respect and ensure respect for the rules of IHL. Excessive force is not acceptable in any circumstances and it is the obligation of all parties involved to ensure unhindered access to victims, who have the right to enjoy protection and assistance to have at least their basic needs met.

Among the important outcomes from the International Conference in November was a strong resolution reaffirming IHL and calling for its wide implementation. The resolution explicitly – and I quote – *“Reaffirms the obligation of parties to an armed conflict, as well as third States, to grant humanitarian relief and relief workers rapid and unimpeded access to civilian populations in need, subject to and in accordance with international humanitarian law”* [end of quote]. As a humanitarian Movement, our NS must have access to people in need following our mission and in conformity with our internal coordination and cooperation rules.

The said resolution further *“Reaffirms the prohibition of attacks directed at civilians or civilian objects, the prohibition of indiscriminate attacks, the principle of proportionality in attack, the obligation to take all feasible precautions in attack, as well as against the effects of attack, to protect and spare the civilian population”* [end of quote].

Yet, we witness over and over again serious breaches against these basic rules in IHL in conflicts around the world – and in our region. Although states are the primary guardians of IHL, National RCRC Societies have an obligation and a right to point to serious non-respect for these legal instruments as well as to advocate for their full implementation and for better awareness of their applicability. Interestingly, among the 300+ pledges submitted at the Conference, training in and dissemination of IHL was among the three most popular pledging areas by NS as well as governments. What remains is to live up to what has been pledged.

Let me go to some of the other main outcomes of the Conference and their impact on our Movement:

We met under the slogan ‘Together for humanity’. This was indeed appropriate for a Conference looking at partnerships as its main theme. Governments have been and continue to be important partners to us and this Conference succeeded in agreeing on a definition of the auxiliary role of NS. This is quite significant as it sets a framework for our cooperation. The agreed definition recognises that NS enjoy a ‘specific and distinctive’ role in their respective national context; further it states that they should never compromise the fundamental principles when acting as auxiliary to governments. NS even have the right to decline cooperation requests if the principles are threatened. Equally important is the fact that governments, by

agreeing to the guidelines, also agree to respect this fundamental right of NS. This achievement will ultimately strengthen our Movement as a whole and its international status and credibility – provided we live up to the essential principles in the adopted guidelines. As NS, we are encouraged to take this to the next step in our home countries and, in dialogue with our governments, define the areas of work where we take on the role of auxiliary and the principles for doing so.

Another important set of guidelines adopted relate to '*Domestic Facilitation and Regulation of International Disaster Relief and Initial Recovery Assistance*' as the rather complicated full title states. We have come to know these guidelines as IDRL, which we have worked on since the early 90's. Again, they provide us with an important framework to ease disaster response in international operations, facilitating crossing borders and accepting basic standards. Ultimately, the guidelines will result in more effective and efficient relief operations benefiting victims of disasters and calamities. However, also these guidelines remain only words unless put into action nationally, in cooperation between the NS and the government.

Both mentioned resolutions represent major achievements at the Conference. They impact directly on the work of NS and on the quality and effectiveness of the services they render to the vulnerable in their own countries and in disasters the world over – if they are systematically transformed into action.

Last but not least, Mr Chairman, we have the Conference Declaration. It addresses the four great challenges the world faces today – environmental degradation and climate change; humanitarian concerns generated by international migration; violence, in particular in urban settings and emergent and recurrent diseases and other public health challenges, such as access to health care. It recognises that the global scale of each of these challenges requires a collective response as it exceeds the coping capacity of individual States or humanitarian organizations. This acknowledgement provides the perfect base for cooperation and partnerships with governments as well as with other organisations.

I will not go into details of the suggested measures to be taken, separately or together with governments. On our part, much builds on traditional RCRC work and activities with the central challenge being how to ensure that we have the capacity to do what we commit ourselves to.

When the new Standing Commission recently met for its first full meeting, it began defining an agenda for the coming 4 years. It looked at the outcomes from the Council and the Conference as well as at what is already on the table. It found that the Conference declaration provides important strategic direction, which must be pulled together into a Movement-wide vision with defined goals and objectives for the next 10-15 years. Where do we want to be then? What do we want to look like? What should happen in our programme- and service delivery for maximum impact benefiting the vulnerable in the world? That is what we sought when, before the

Conference, we stated the expectation that it would create the base for such a long-term Movement agenda when exploring the humanitarian consequences of the aforementioned great challenges.

To devote maximum attention to the results from this by any standard successful 30th Conference, to walk our talk, we have to keep the resolutions and the declaration on our tables – not in the files in the cupboards. A good question is always – what is in it for me? – and then act accordingly.

As trustee of the International Conference, the Standing Commission will carefully follow their implementation by all components. And it will lead where such leadership is required.

May I take this opportunity to thank you for your support to the Standing Commission during the last years. It has been very important to us and I hope you will extend your encouragement and assistance also to the new team, which certainly is equally committed to see the Movement move forward and to contribute to strengthening the role and functioning of the Commission, not only as trustee of the Conference but as the only regularly meeting Movement body encompassing all components with a mandate to address issues of concern to all.

In conclusion, I wish to express my thanks and appreciation to the President of the Tunisian Red Crescent, Dr. Brahim El Gharbi for his leadership and to the Red Crescent Society and Secretary General Dr Tahar Cheniti for hosting this meeting.

I wish all my brothers and sisters in the Arab group success in dealing with the many and important topics on the agenda.

Thank you.