

**7th Asia and Pacific Regional Conference
of the International Federation of Red Cross and
Red Crescent Societies**

Singapore 19-23 November 2006

**Opening Address
H.E. Dr Mohammed Al-Hadid**

Chairman, Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

“Serving Humanity Effectively”

It is a great pleasure to be with you here today to meet representatives of National Societies from such a wide range of countries, truly diverse and each with a unique identity and history.

This unique togetherness was demonstrated at the International Conference in June when two new National Societies, Magen David Adom in Israel and the Palestine Red Crescent were unanimously afforded membership in the International Federation – evidence of a strong and united Movement – and it gives me special pleasure to welcome them here today to their first Statutory meeting as full members.

The theme for this 7th regional conference of Asia-Pacific is “Serving Humanity Effectively” - a highly relevant message and a challenge! The coming days will tell us how to achieve that while ensuring that we work together seamlessly in fulfilling our mission to assist the most vulnerable.

I would also ask you to reflect on how our Movement can effectively fight the spread and

increase of racism, discrimination and xenophobia against people of different cultures and beliefs, against migrants and other people being marginalised for various reasons. Looking at the environment in which we work in our vast and diverse region, I find this challenge just as important, if not more so, as efficiency and effectiveness.

Two of the most disastrous events ever, the Tsunami and the earthquake in Pakistan hit this region. They provided success stories on securing assistance while also identifying areas where we still need to improve. In the Middle East - also part of this region - bitter conflicts and unrest, war and misery are an every-day reality for hundreds of thousands of people. Those situations truly challenge delivery of neutral and impartial humanitarian assistance.

We have been characterised by a Tufts University study as the "global public good". That is how we are perceived, that is what we have to live up to. We have to constantly ensure that this perception is also the reality.

A recent study by the same university, "Humanitarian Agenda 2015", claims that in the post 9/11 world, action aimed at alleviating the suffering of the most vulnerable has been incorporated into a northern political and security agenda. A claim that begs the question - was it ever much different? On the other hand, the threat of terrorism and violence for humanitarian action cannot be ignored.

The same study finds that humanitarian action is widely viewed as a northern enterprise, which carries values sometimes at odds with those of civilians affected by conflict on the ground. It tells us that Northern humanitarians need to listen more, learn from the resourcefulness, resilience and coping strategies of communities.

Top-down approaches need to give way to more inclusive, culturally sensitive approaches that are fully accountable to beneficiaries. To quote a proverb from Singapore 'A land that rewards foreign talents over locals will soon be foreign of talents locally, and eventually be foreign of talents totally.'

Some of the many reviews and evaluations of the Tsunami operations reflect similar findings. Even if the Red Cross/Red Crescent is not directly implicated in such claims, we have to be vigilant and watchful so as not to risk manipulation by political forces and interests and in so doing surrender the needs and expectations of the people we assist.

We operate in a fast changing world, unprecedented in speed, scope and scale. While becoming more interdependent, sharp social and economic inequalities persist.

In a fresh report the High Level Panel of the UN Secretary General on "System-wide Coherence in the areas of development, humanitarian assistance and the environment" paints the picture as follows: "Some of the poorest countries and communities remain isolated from economic integration and the benefits of globalization, disproportionately vulnerable to crisis and social upheaval. There is greater awareness of the acceleration of environmental degradation and climate change, and its effects on agricultural productivity and food security. More conflicts are within states than between them, and the risk of terrorism and infectious disease illustrate how security threats travel across borders."

The panel recommends that the UN needs to overcome its fragmentation and deliver "as one"

in the areas of development, humanitarian assistance and environment.

This is seen possible through consolidation of organizational entities and through stronger commitment to working together on the implementation of one strategy.

To avoid a fragmented approach to humanitarian assistance, the Panel recommends – and I quote – “stronger partnership arrangements between the UN, national governments, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs, based on the coordination and leadership roles of the Emergency Relief Coordinator at the global level. These arrangements should support and ensure effective and inclusive participation in the Cluster Lead Agency approach. Procedures, including the definition of “provider of last resort” and how this relates to the position of cluster leader, need to be clarified”. (Unquote).

The Panel sees an important role for civil society organisations as “indispensable partners in delivering services to the poor, to catalyse action within countries, mobilize broad-based movements and hold leaders accountable for their commitments”. In crisis, post-conflict and post-disaster countries, national and international NGOs are vital implementing partners—without them, UN humanitarian assistance could not be delivered.

There is potential and opportunity for our Movement to continue to develop our co-operation with the UN – firmly based on our fundamental principles. I firmly believe this can be done and managed in a way that in the end will result in “Serving Humanity Effectively”.

However, the competition is tough out there and the need for professionally targeted and delivered assistance is great. Good internal cooperation is essential to prevent us from becoming our own enemies and to ensure that the Movement and its components can play the role of preferred partner both to the UN and governments – not closing any doors for cooperation with others, especially within the world of NGOs.

Wasting energy on internal competition instead of complementing each other in our respective competences means we risk losing the opportunities that such co-operation presents.

We are a global Movement, yet we work locally. Our impact is felt at grassroots level. If we lose touch with the day-to-day realities in communities around the world, our work is left in a void. This is true of our Geneva institutions as well as for National Societies in their respective situations.

Our network reaches local communities in all countries. With hundreds of thousands of volunteers we have links to schools and other community entities. We possess the power of social and community mobilisation – but are we using it wisely? In health this power can be geared towards preventing infectious diseases as well as towards promoting healthy life styles. We can make a difference by mobilizing the volunteers living amongst us. They know what works in practice. To support their work, a wise strategy is to strengthen cooperation and partnership with governments, WHO, UNAIDS and other organisations, NGOs and relevant actors in civil society. When working together, greater progress can and will be achieved.

Our emblems are among the best-known ‘brands’ in the world – which doesn’t necessarily mean that our work is equally well known! To make a real difference in the areas to be discussed here, we have to build an organisation with a clear vision, which is forward thinking, creative, decisive and focused in what it undertakes – without losing sight of the beneficiaries

and demands of professionalism and accountability.

In closing, I want to leave you with an observation from China: When written in Chinese, the word «crisis» is composed of two characters. One represents danger, the other opportunity. Let us grasp this opportunity to always alleviate the suffering – and remember that a <wish> changes nothing - a <decision> can change everything!

I wish you a most successful Conference.

Thank you.