

**7th European Regional Red Cross
and Red Crescent Conference
Istanbul, Turkey
20-24 May 2007**

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

Chairman, Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

I thank the Turkish Red Crescent for the invitation and the opportunity to be here today at this very timely Regional Conference and to meet representatives of National Societies from such a wide and diverse region with its equally various and unique identity and history.

I am particularly pleased to see that the main themes on your agenda are migration, health and care. The very same ones that the Standing Commission has put at the core of the coming 30th International Conference, when the Movement meets with its most important partners: the States. 140 years after the first Conference in 1867 we will together analyse the humanitarian consequences of these two key areas of concern and of other phenomena of equal importance, namely environmental hazards and climate change and violence ranging from urban and sectarian violence to that in conflicts and wars.

The Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement is not concerned with passing judgement on the reasons behind developments in these four areas; our sole concern is the humanitarian consequences and vulnerabilities they create for millions of people around the globe. In the light of these consequences we have to open our eyes to what is going on around us and act accordingly.

The overriding aim of this coming Conference is to agree on the major challenges ahead, to set an agenda for the Movement for the coming 5-10 years and to decide how best to deal with

the challenges in cooperation and partnership.

For us it is important to listen to you, the National Societies, as we prepare for such a major Conference to obtain your views and input.

Of all the components of the Movement, it is the National Societies that are in the front line; they are the ones who face the immediate consequences and have to take the appropriate action. They are the acknowledged auxiliaries to the authorities in the humanitarian field. In the end, they are the ones to negotiate with their governments on how to work as an auxiliary and decide which partnerships are needed.

The slogan for the coming Conference – “Together for humanity” – was adopted by the Standing Commission for a reason: We firmly believe that the challenges ahead of mankind cannot be addressed by States alone – or by ourselves as a Movement and part of Civil Society. They demand that we join forces, work in cooperation and partnership for lasting results.

Humanitarian assistance also faces challenges. A recent study by Tufts 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.

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 must give way to those which are more inclusive and culturally sensitive which are accountable to beneficiaries. I quote a proverb from Asia: ‘A land that rewards foreign talents over locals will soon be foreign of talents locally, and eventually be foreign of talents totally.’

Even in the Red Cross/Red Crescent we have to be watchful in order not to risk manipulation by political forces and interests and in so doing surrender the needs and expectations of the people we assist.

The RCRC has been characterised as the “global public good”. That is how we are perceived; this is what we have to live up to. We have to constantly make sure that this perception is also the reality.

We operate in a fast changing world, unprecedented in speed, scope and scale. We have to ensure we are up to the challenges around us, that we are proactive rather than reactive in our thinking and action.

“We never did it that way before” is the recipe for extinction. Only an organisation that can learn, adapt to a changing environment and is capable of innovation has a future.

It is not only the fast moving and changing environment that concerns us. We also have to be on the alert against threats to humanitarian independent and neutral action. Sadako Ogata said once that “there are no humanitarian solutions to humanitarian problems”. I could not agree more. We have seen that humanitarian assistance delivered by government systems,

often with the help of military, tends to become a substitute for lacking political solutions blurring the fundamental principle of assistance based on need. When humanitarian assistance becomes part of a mixed political and military agenda, established aid organisations defending neutral and impartial assistance risk losing out. They are in danger of being perceived as an extension of a political agenda, of political aims and objectives, which in turn weakens the credibility and even impacts on security.

At the same time, the threat of terrorism and violence has become a fact of life. Local RCRC staff and volunteers are at far greater risk than international staff although both have paid an increasingly high price for their commitment to alleviating the suffering of the most vulnerable.

Further, the competition out there is tough 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 to the UN, to governments and others.

Wasting energy on internal competition instead of complementing each other in our respective roles means we lose the opportunities that co-operation presents.

Your work here in the coming days will be very important in preparing the ground for our deliberations at the Conference in November.

There is no wealth without health, the pre-requisite for all wellbeing and development. Our Movement and in particular its National Societies have an impressive track record working with health. They are an impressive mobilising force with a presence in all communities creating an awareness of health threats, promoting health and healthy life styles, preventing disease and providing life saving first aid in accidents and emergencies. Again, we have to retain our vigilance when it comes to new and changing disease patterns such as avian flu, where we can provide crucial early warnings and help with prevention. Changes in disease patterns are also driven by increased drug resistance and increased international travel.

National Societies are in a key position to enter into partnerships with their governments to advocate and act when it comes to new health threats and re-emerging diseases. At the Conference we can prove our credibility and the added value of working with us by sharing our vast experience and best practise.

According to the International Organisation for Migration, one of the defining global issues of the early twenty-first century is migration. More people are on the move today than at any other time in human history; an estimated 200 million people today live outside their place of birth. This amounts to the equivalent of one in every thirty-five persons and the pace shows no signs of slowing down - on the contrary; migration is expected to grow by about 3 % annually.

Migration has its dark sides – and for a Movement with a mission to assist the most vulnerable, the victims of human trafficking and forced migration are of great concern. About half of all migrants are women and a significant number fall victim to trafficking for sexual purposes, which in its economic value to organised crime is second only to drugs. Yet women have fewer opportunities for legal migration; many become irregular or undocumented migrants with lack of support and at great exposure to risk, to violence and exploitation.

Another sad fact is that around 50% of people smuggled and sold into forced work are minors that end up working in the sex trade. Last week, Christian Aid said in its report “Human Tide: the Real Migration Crisis” that forced migration is now the most urgent threat facing poor people in the developing world.

Sometimes public opinion does not view RCRC involvement with irregular migrants positively. It must be remembered, however, that work with and for them is not a statement on their legal status or the motives which have forced them to move.

Armed conflict leads to massive population movement, internal and external displacement, refugee problems and irregular massive migration as for example in today’s Middle East. Four million people have been forced to leave their homes in Iraq; half of them also their country. The impact of such movements on the host country is not sufficiently understood. In my own country ‘guests’ from neighbouring Iraq, adding 15-20% to the population, are estimated to cost the infrastructure of Jordan to the tune of a billion USD per annum in health, education and housing costs. Again – only political solutions can allow these people to go back home. In the meantime, we, together with other humanitarian actors and our government, have to see to their most urgent immediate needs.

When discussing migration, discrimination cannot be ignored. I encourage 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. Looking at Europe as well as the Middle East, I find this challenge very important and quite obvious. Our mission is to defend human dignity. In the migration debate we should emphasise the richness different people and cultures bring to their new home lands and communities. The natural starting point is our own National Societies: are we genuinely opening our doors to others?

Our strength is the specificity of the RCRC. Combined with our humanitarian mission and profiting from our global network and regional and international cooperation, we can negotiate the space and role we need to fulfil our mission as auxiliary or partner to our governments and other organisations from a position of strength without compromising our Fundamental Principles. This should guide our work here and also when we meet at the RCRC Conference in November.

I very much look forward to the session on Movement matters on Wednesday morning. I also want to challenge you to forward looking thinking when tackling the agenda. As the greatest humanitarian Movement, we can show the way, we can make a difference.

I wish you a most successful Conference.

Thank you.