

**XVIII Inter-American Conference
Guayaquil, Ecuador
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**Opening Address
H.E. Dr Mohammed Al-Hadid**

Chairman, Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to be invited to Guayaquil, for a gathering that promises to come out with impressive results judging by the comprehensive preparations and participatory approach in addressing timely concerns. Safer and healthier communities is the chosen slogan, which describes in a nutshell the essence of the Red Cross/Crescent task and its reach into communities all over the world.

Focusing on capacity building, which is the ability to fulfil our mission, is an effective manner. It seems that everyone, from practitioners to CEOs is calling for increased attention to capacity building of non-profit organisations but so far, the rhetoric is ahead of the work.

Creating and maintaining active citizen involvement through associations and groups of all kinds is an important feature of strong communities. An organisation can have a vital mission, good leadership and sufficient resources but unless it is diverse, active and known in the community, its impact will be limited. An essential element for strengthening and extending the work of community based organisations is outreach. It can take many forms, including marketing and public relations; community education and advocacy; collaboration, alliances and partnerships; networking and much more.

Increased networking and greater outreach mean access to more people. The more people know about the organisation and its work, the better the opportunities for attracting them to the organisation, as active board members, staff, volunteers, clients or supporters. Capacity building efforts should not be about saving a dying organisation. Rather, they should be seen as evaluating community needs as basis for National Society objectives and action.

I understand you will adopt a new Inter-American Plan, including new elements such as community risk reduction, community health and promotion of non-discrimination and respect for diversity in communities. I congratulate you on these aims, which are indeed relevant to our entire Movement.

I want to give you an example on how the peaks of the highest mountains are conquered. Let me take you back to the 29th International Conference, which took place in Geneva last June and where we finalised the adoption of the additional emblem, the Red Crystal, and when two National Societies, the Magen David Adom in Israel and the Palestine Red Crescent Society joined the Federation and the Movement as full members.

There were fears at the time that this will disrupt the unity of the Movement and cause great damage. What came to my mind at that Conference was what a South American philosopher once said: "If I dream alone, it is only a dream. If we dream together, it becomes reality". A dream to have a universal Movement was realised after 58 years. Together we showed how this dream became a reality and what can be achieved when we stand united in our efforts.

Now we are preparing for the 30th International Conference to be held in Geneva next November. It will have the demanding task of looking at humanitarian challenges in the next 10-15 years, to set an agenda for the Movement and to agree on action in collaboration and partnership with Governments to address these challenges. You can see in the documents you have received that we aim at analysing the humanitarian consequences of environmental challenges including climate change, violence, migration, recurring and new health threats. We will focus on the consequences, not on the reasons behind these developments. We want to approach the topics from the viewpoint of our humanitarian mandate.

The slogan for the 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.

The themes you will discuss in the coming days are also important in preparing for the November Conference. Risk reduction, health, and promotion of non-discrimination and respect for diversity in communities are good links to analysing the humanitarian consequences of the key developments that I just mentioned.

Risk reduction is certainly linked to preparedness and awareness of, for example, what continued climate change will bring about. There is a broad understanding that weather events and patterns lead to more frequent and intense disasters. And as always, it is the poor, the elderly, the disabled – in short – the most vulnerable, who suffer most and pay the price for, for example, increased flooding, more cyclones and hurricanes, drought and rising sea levels.

Experts on the Intergovernmental Panel on "Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability" of Climate Change acknowledged in their recent report that "vulnerable groups are at a greater risk when it comes to climate change". This is and must be our concern at the Conference. It is here as in other areas that the expected outcomes should be proactive, focusing on preventive action and advocacy. That leads us to the issue of disaster reduction.

According to the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, in 2006 we had 426 reported natural disasters that killed more than 23,000 people and affected 143 million others. The same source states that 2006 saw a strong increase in the occurrence of floods, with 235 reported, which accounted for 55% of all disasters registered. Floods and windstorms continued to be the two major causes of economic impact – both are widely quoted as increasing due to the impact of climate change. When combined, these two types of extreme events caused over 25 billion US\$ in economic losses of the total estimated at 34.6 billion US\$ last year. In addition to the humanitarian tragedies disasters create, their impact on the economies of stricken countries is significant.

While we are here in Guayaquil, the Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction is holding its first session in Geneva. The Hyogo Framework for Action, adopted in Kobe, Japan in 2005, has given new impetus for strengthening the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, which is evolving towards a global system of partnership for disaster risk reduction. Governments, the RCRC and NGOs are involved in the process. The framework reflects a major shift from traditional emphasis on disaster response towards holistic disaster reduction. It is being acknowledged that natural hazards in themselves do not inevitably lead to disasters; disasters result from the impact of such hazards on vulnerable social systems. In other words, disasters can be prevented through human action which is designed to reduce vulnerability.

Here again is a link to our mission. We add value by being present in communities the world over. We have a unique position and unparalleled opportunities for partnerships with our respective governments as well as with other organisations in civil society to actively contribute to risk reduction, including improved health and awareness of health risks in communities.

The four key areas the Conference will be looking at are inevitably interlinked and we need to analyse the consequences accordingly. Environmental changes such as rising sea levels lead to migration. Large scale population movements may lead to increased violence due to rapid and unplanned urbanisation, overpopulation and fight for space and a living. Migration can also bring about increased intolerance and discrimination, which we have already observed in many parts of the world at a time when more people than ever before in human history live outside their places of birth. This theme is particularly relevant and must be addressed from a basic community perspective as you are doing.

I would like to share with you an initiative on how we as a Movement might address the consequences of the environmental changes around us and which would help us “walk our talk”. We must be conscious of the impact that, for example, big meetings and gatherings like this one have on the environment. We should make an effort to organise ‘green conferences’ to minimize the “carbon footprint” of our meetings. Carbon dioxide (CO₂) emissions can be reduced through efficiency and conservation in our use of for example electricity, paper, supplies and travel. Take travelling for example, which is the cause of most CO₂ emissions. Did you know that two return flights from Geneva to this meeting create nearly 15 tonnes of CO₂ according to the calculation developed by “myclimate” organisation?

The good news is that we can neutralize the amount of carbon we cause by our travel by purchasing carbon offsets through some voluntary offset companies or organisations already in action. The funds are used to implement and manage projects that avoid, reduce or absorb greenhouse gases through renewable energy, energy efficiency, or forestry projects. Because climate change is non-localized, it doesn’t matter where you offset your carbon; the positive

impact will be the same.

Myclimate -organisation reports that the total costs for compensation of the 'carbon footprints' of two return flights from Geneva to Guayaquil would be 600 CHF. That money can support projects that mitigate global warming and help people in poor countries improve the quality of their lives: local air quality is improved and the projects help build a sustainable local economy. Just imagine the impact of all our travels to Guayaquil...!

I want to leave you with some food for thought: I call on the Movement to set an example and to seriously consider compensating for the greenhouse gases we help create and the footprints we leave on the environment. We can design our own programmes or contribute as partners to existing organisations. I hope you will join me in this initiative.

I read in your documents that you seek a more strategic approach in your new Inter-American Plan. We have similar aims for the upcoming Conference. We seek a future-oriented strategic outcome, setting the framework for result oriented partnerships to tackle the immense challenges ahead.

In a fast moving and changing world, we have to adapt to the changing environment, to the changing realities and to future priorities. In conclusion allow me to quote two proverbs from your region. A Brazilian proverb – and I quote - “One who doesn't look ahead, remains behind”. Another proverb from Latin America states “Camaron que se duerme, se lo lleva la corriente”. The shrimp that falls asleep gets carried by the current.

Let's keep our eyes wide open and concentrate on addressing the needs of those who have put their trust in us.

I wish you an inspiring, innovative and fruitful Conference!
Thank you.

So let's all dream together. May peace be upon you, salam, shalom, take care and may your God be with you.