

“Global warning “

Opening Address
H.E. Dr Mohammed Al-Hadid
Chairman, Standing Commission of the RC/RC
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It gives me great pleasure to welcome you, on behalf of the Standing Commission, to this 30th International Conference. I am delighted to see so many of you here. This Conference is of particular value and importance at this time, when we see so much suffering in a polarised, troubled world. Our challenge, in line with the theme of ‘Together for humanity’, will seek to enhance our cooperation and partnerships so as to reinforce the high humanitarian ideals of Henry Dunant, the founder of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

With my experience in this great Movement, I am convinced that we *are* what we say: we *are* the largest humanitarian organization in the world; we *are* best positioned with the *best potential* to offer real expertise to partners and collaborators. Millions of members and volunteers in our 186 National Societies ensure that we have timely and accurate information, which reflects the humanitarian reality on the ground in local communities. This is the best possible starting point for effective preparedness, which must be based on sound knowledge of the facts and the reality on the ground.

To be fully effective and to continue to be our governments’ preferred partner, we must ensure that our local capacities are relevant and that we are able to respond to the needs. We must reliably assess vulnerabilities and anticipate future risks, be they economical, social or environmental, which arise from changes in our climate. In comparison to the attention that scientific analysis gives the environmental and economic implications of global warming, human vulnerability is still largely neglected. When we look at forming new partnerships to address the potential humanitarian consequences, this conference offers a golden opportunity to highlight this crucial issue. ‘Together for humanity’ is not just a slogan; it is a serious challenge for all of us.

To be able to deal with what lies ahead, we need to be prepared. To fulfil our mission in a changing world, *nothing makes better sense than increased preparedness*, which allows us to act effectively without wasting scarce resources. Closely linked to preparedness is disaster risk reduction. The Federation’s experiences, at the local community level, show that a variety of best practise initiatives are already being implemented with positive results.

Experienced sailors know that when in dangerous, shallow waters, someone must be up on the main mast to keep a look out ahead. That simple watchman’s role has time and time again proved vitally important. As the global lookout for humanity, forewarned as we already are by the predictions of trends ahead, the Red Cross Red Crescent wishes to

sound a global warning. We are sailing, head on, towards hazards which disproportionately threaten, as is so often the case, the most vulnerable, the poorest of the poor.

Of the risks we see from our look-out, the largest by far is that posed by climate change. We must not argue about the relative merit of this or that scientific prediction; we will not gain anything from participating in the blame game. We must focus on the simple truth that *change is happening* and it will inevitably carry humanitarian consequences.

The Red Cross Red Crescent focuses solely on human vulnerability as outcome of climate change and global warming. This is our sphere of excellence, the area where we can do the most. We must ensure that human vulnerability is considered with the same urgency and importance as other consequences in this debate.

We can draw on hard facts: increases in the number of natural disasters, increases in the magnitude of disasters, new geographical areas being hit by serious catastrophes, and new recurring patterns of disaster. These facts are interlinked and related to the direct effects of climate change.

Water plays a central role in these disasters and even as parts of the world braced themselves for too much rain, other parts experienced extreme drought. During 2007 we have witnessed the power of extreme weather. The Asian monsoon rains appeared as a destructive force washing away crops and topsoil, causing landslides, inundating villages and cities, destroying infrastructure and leaving behind contaminated water sources and scenes of utter devastation. At one point, half of Bangladesh was under water and again we witness the devastating force of nature there.

The Chinese Academy on Science has warned of signs that the sources of the Jangtse and the Yellow Rivers may be drying up. Glaciers are disappearing in the Himalayas. Waterways emanating from that mountain range are currently feeding more than a third of the human race.

We know that rising temperatures increase evaporation from oceans, lakes, rivers and also directly from the soil. All this evaporation will result in increased rainfall in large parts of the globe while drought will be the predominant feature in other parts. Rainfall patterns will change. For example, Africa North of the Equator will become dryer all the way up to Southern Europe. Northern Europe will see more rain. Detailed and reliable predictions for changes in various parts of the world have been made. They are known, largely undisputed, and we should take them into account in our planning.

Changes in evaporation and rainfall will not be a blessing. We have already seen an increase in floods, landslides and storms. We will see worsening droughts in large areas, with increased risks of wildfires and heat waves. Inevitably, we will see more disasters caused by the changing weather patterns, and many of them will hit countries that have previously only played a role in helping the less fortunate to deal with such disasters elsewhere. The increasing occurrence of disasters in new areas on our traditional disaster maps will underline the need for better preparedness and increased local capacities to respond.

Dealing with complex slow-onset disasters is very much Red Cross Red Crescent territory.

Some of the land carrying the largest concentrations of human beings will be rendered unable to provide sustenance for its people. A decrease in the agricultural capacity of mother earth and an increase in the global population paint a grim picture of global inequality, imbalance, hunger and conflict. People are forced to leave areas that can no longer support them. They will, like so many before them, head for cities where they often end up in the slums. The poorest will pay the heaviest price in human suffering.

Urban slums have not traditionally been high on the Red Cross Red Crescent agenda. This needs to change, because urban slums are growing faster than any other form of human habitation. Increasingly, the global poor are exchanging the misery of rural unhappiness for the hopelessness of the urban slums and those slums are often first to be affected by epidemics, floods, landslides, violence, drugs or simply a total lack of public services.

Why are the poor the first to die? Because they often have no choice but to live in the wrong places, where they are unprotected from harsh environmental conditions and at the mercy of overcrowding and poverty. These voiceless poor are not a priority on the agendas of politicians and planners so their plight too often goes unnoticed.

Consequences of such circumstances lead to humanitarian problems, which the Red Cross Red Crescent deals with.

Population movements are a major issue on today's global agenda. People move for the very same reasons that they have moved throughout history: to flee conflict, persecution or unemployment, to seek a better future for themselves and their children. Migration does not always carry gloomy or sad stories; in most cases it has a positive impact on the host communities, it is beneficial to the migrants themselves and to their families back home. However, we also have negative experiences that concern us as a Movement, for instance when children, as we have seen, become victims of greed and exploitation. We deeply deplore this phenomenon where children are treated as merchandise and are traded for spare parts and even prostitution.

Migration is influenced by both push and pull effects. The inequality of the world has created pull effects, leading to an exodus of people from developing countries seeking employment in the wealthy, post-industrial service societies of the Northern hemisphere. The consequences of climate change add an irrevocable push effect to the equation, forcing people to migrate because they simply cannot sustain life where they are.

Again, the humanitarian consequences of migration involve problems, which Red Cross Red Crescent deals with – without judgement or discrimination.

Another dimension of these phenomena is the difficulties that even the largest economies in the world face in rebuilding after major disasters. It took less than a day for Katrina to wreak havoc on people, property and the landscape, but it will take years to rebuild. Two years after Katrina, only half of the pre-disaster population of New Orleans have been able to return. If a country with such abundant resources has difficulty in coping, what can we expect from nations with fewer resources?

It will take years to rebuild in the wake of the recent wildfires in Greece or those in Southern California. One single large scale disaster can set back a whole nation's development by years. Buildings can be rebuilt quickly; restoring livelihoods or the psyche

of people devastated by nature's wrath takes much longer. We need to redirect our thinking from compensating for damage to a mindset, where we strive to alleviate the worst effects of disasters and to prevent damage in the first place.

This is what the Red Cross Red Crescent is advocating for.

The global geography of illness and health is being affected, too. Soaring temperatures allow certain types of bacteria and viruses to gain additional ground. Mosquitoes, spreading malaria and dengue fever, are finding new places to flourish as median temperatures increase.

Red Cross Red Crescent experience in preventing and fighting disease is invaluable.

In parallel with such external developments, national and local needs for Red Cross/Red Crescent involvement are growing. In many countries, the future brings calls for greater contributions, in terms of time, money and volunteers from our National Societies. This in turn may affect the international work of the Red Cross Red Crescent in at least two ways:

A requirement for additional RCRC resources to meet growing national needs may restrict the capacity of some traditional "donor" National Societies to fund bilateral and multilateral programmes with their partner National Societies, the Federation and the ICRC.

Secondly, we are still experiencing an 'era of benevolence', with relatively easy access to resources for the support of worthy causes. Given the prospect of future potential worst case scenarios, we must prepare ourselves for the possibility of a "depression" hitting humanitarian funding. This further underlines the need to invest in better local capacity on both sides of the North/South divide.

The Red Cross Red Crescent offers a ready framework to deal with this issue.

Last but not least, we face a rising concern that our youth is growing into a generation of conflict. At the very core of many conflicts today we find intolerance, xenophobia or both. People, who wish to further extreme agendas, plant fear and hatred into young minds with fearful results.

The Red Cross Red Crescent Movement is the neutral global actor, which has tolerance and respect for others permanently embedded in its DNA. We have, time and again, proven through the actions of our people that we respect and live by our principles. It is time for us to think how we can take this characteristic of who we are and turn it into even more effective programmes and activities, which could take the first steps towards healing those who have lost their way and turned to hatred as a way of life.

Anything worth doing is worth doing well and I believe the strong value base and the proven track record of our Movement will continue to be of utmost importance as a partner when we move "together for humanity".

It will require time and conscious and coordinated efforts, but it will bring results. An African proverb says: "If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together". We want to go far and we want to go together to help the most vulnerable people in this world.