

**The 4th Conference of the  
Red Crescent 6 Red Cross Societies of the  
Middle East and North Africa**

**Kingdom of Bahrain  
14-18 March 2004**

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

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

Mr President of the Bahrain Red Crescent,  
Mr President of the International Federation,  
Representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross,  
Respected representatives of the Government of Bahrain,  
Your Excellencies,  
Ladies and gentlemen,  
Dear Red Crescent and Red Cross friends and colleagues,

It is a special privilege and honour for me to be here with you and to take the floor for the first time in my capacity as Chairman of the Standing Commission at a meeting of my own region, together with my neighbouring National Societies.

My message, however, will be the same as it would be to any National Societies! I want to emphasise the importance  
ñ of cooperation and open consultations within our Movement on all levels, in and between all regions and all components;  
ñ of <walking our talk> – of implementing what we have committed ourselves to,

strengthening our credibility internally and externally.

I assure you that the new Standing Commission is taking its mandate and its tasks seriously.  
We will

ñ promote, encourage and find ways together with all the components of this great Movement to ensure that the decisions we took together at our recent statutory meetings, in partnership with our governments and other collaborators, are taken seriously and are followed through;

ñ We will live up to challenges we face as a humanitarian Movement and...

ñ We will, as independent and neutral actors – at times and when needed - also push our partners to live up to their humanitarian commitments and obligations!

Among the objectives set for this 4th MENA Conference I read:

«To review matters of importance to the Movement, which require discussion and follow-up within the Region».

May I take this opportunity to hopefully move forward some of that discussion ....

I will, in the next few minutes, concentrate on the implementation of the outcomes of both the Council of Delegates and the 28th International Conference, where we all last met in November - December last year.

Let me start with the Council, with our <internal matters>, if I may say so. Some of them, however, were reinforced by the Conference.

We adopted, by consensus, a total of 11 resolutions. Subtracting two, which dealt with practicalities of the International Conference, that leaves us with 9 substantial areas to consider and to take action.

I want to start by sharing with you a personal reaction i had when studying the review of the implementation of the Movement Strategy before the last Council:

I was taken aback by the finding that NS have a tendency to implement such decisions and outcomes of statutory meetings, which are considered <easy> or in line with national or traditional ways of working and thinking.....

Human – we all tend to do so!.

However, when I look at what we have undertaken to do, I'm afraid that there are no <easy solutions>.

To implement the decisions – or resolutions as we call them - the Standing Commission appointed at its first meeting four working groups to help us tackle the issues: These are to work on the emblem, the Seville Agreement and the implementation and possible updating of the Movement Strategy. The fourth group will assist us in preparing for the Council next year and the International Conference in 2007. Although we just closed the previous ones, these meetings are just around the corner, closer than we would like to think!

A few words about these present priorities – others will follow, I'm sure.

Regarding the emblem, the Council and the International Conference requested in their resolutions the Standing Commission «to continue to give high priority to securing, as soon as circumstances permit, a comprehensive and lasting solution..... on the basis of the proposed draft Third Additional Protocol».

The Council and the Conference resolutions further «underlined the urgency of reinforcing measures for the protection of war victims, medical personnel and humanitarian workers in all circumstances, and the significance in this context of the proposed Third Additional Protocol». We will unwaveringly continue the work of the previous Commission on the question of the emblem. Our clear mandate is to obtain a solution to improve protection by the adoption of an additional emblem free of any religious or other connotations. It will stand alongside, but by no means replace, the existing emblems and help to ensure appropriate protection and assistance to victims of conflicts and unrest - whatever the origin of those may be. We want to work towards reinforced respect for humanitarian workers and make sure they have access to all victims and can implement their mandate. In adopting the resolution at the 28th Conference, Governments joined us in this important aim. This specific issue was also highlighted in the Declaration adopted by the conference.

We also have a clear mandate to fulfil the fundamental principle of universality through the adoption of an additional emblem. We want to see well functioning National Societies, adhering to the fundamental principles, active and working throughout the world; not only in their respective countries, but as full participants in our global family. Only then will we be able to say that the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement really does work for all the vulnerable people of the world, wherever they may be.

Work on addressing the challenges of the Seville Agreement is about to start. There has been much discussion about these challenges, especially in this region, which is represented by Qatar in that working group; the region is represented also in all the others.

The Movement Strategy continues to be an important tool for us in developing better cooperation. To try to eliminate persistent confusion, I once again want to underline the relation between the Movement Strategy and for example Strategy 2010 – which is also on your Conference agenda:

The Movement Strategy concerns the how – how can we better work together to improve efficiency and effectiveness, to build our image and credibility as major partners and actors in the humanitarian field, nationally and, as a Movement, internationally.

Strategy 2010 and the ICRC future directions concern the what. What should we work on?

What are our priorities, roles and responsibilities, functions and tasks as components of the Movement?

The working group on the Strategy has been asked to promote its implementation and to review and evaluate how well we are doing that.

It has to look at all the 17 actions – how have they been addressed? What has been done? Can we see a strategic impact? What challenges remain? What new ones are possibly emerging from the point of view of good internal Movement cooperation?

The fact that we have established working groups to help us drive these issues doesn't mean that NS would be freed from work on them! In the resolutions, all components are called on to take action, to implement, to develop, to do all kinds of things to ensure that we move forward – the essence in the context of Movement.

The Council discussed extensively the theme of «Respect for diversity, fight against discrimination and intolerance». It adopted a clear, <almost plan of action> on this in resolution 9. As a Movement, we have to be on the alert and concerned with what appears to be increasing discrimination and intolerance in today's troubled world; especially concerning our region

and its people.

This touches the core of our fundamental principles, the humanitarian values we believe in and want to follow. We have to fight discrimination and intolerance in all possible forms - cultural, political, religious, economic, ethnic, gender. Respect for diversity, tolerance and non-discrimination are keys to promoting a better understanding locally, nationally, regionally, internationally. We said at the Conference that stigma and discrimination kill – not only people affected by HIV/AIDS and other diseases but also by contributing to uncertainty, increased vulnerability and to the evolution of conflict.

As always – change begins at home. The resolution calls on Presidents and Secretaries General in its 1st action point to assess, within the Movement, the composition of leadership, staff, volunteers and membership at all levels of the organisations they lead. We have to lead by example and make sure that any diversity in our countries is reflected in the structures of our organisations.

I challenge you to engage in a comprehensive process of analysing this and other resolutions in your National Society – what do they actually mean for you? And to start planning the action you intend to take.....

I want to leave you with the same challenge regarding the outcomes of the 28th International Conference.

We adopted, together with our governments, a strong Declaration for protecting human dignity – the theme of our Conference. It addresses some of the most pressing humanitarian challenges facing the world today. Let me cite a few important commitments from this Declaration: We reaffirm the principles and rules of International Humanitarian Law and commit to increase respect for humanitarian principles and values, to promote tolerance, non-discrimination and respect for diversity among all peoples.

We commit to disseminate IHL to armed forces and to the civilian population in collaboration with - amongst others - media and religious institutions. We agree to ensure respect for civilians in all kinds of conflicts and unrest, in particular concerning women and children, and to respect the cultural heritage of all people.

Regarding new security threats, we confirm that IHL is applicable to all situations of armed conflict and foreign occupation. We condemn all acts or threats of violence aimed at spreading terror among civilian populations.

We renounce all acts or threats of violence against humanitarian workers; they must be respected and protected in all circumstances to be able to prevent and alleviate human suffering. Protecting human dignity further requires us to raise health standards and reduce health risks through comprehensive prevention, treatment and care measures, and to provide access to medicines at affordable prices.

We commit to reduce the impact and risk of disasters by integrating disaster risk reduction into all national and international planning and policy instruments. When disasters strike, we agree to implement all appropriate legal, policy and operational measures to facilitate and effectively respond to them.

To do all this, we adopted an Agenda for Humanitarian Action, which in detail outlines a working programme for the next 4 years. It contains a total of 65 action points supporting the four general objectives dealing with the missing, weapons, disaster reduction and health issues, notably HIV/AIDS.

It is a tall order. None of the actions or the objectives will happen or materialize without our concerted efforts. The beauty lies in that we have agreed to tackle all this in partnership with our governments, which committed themselves to the same outcomes.

We don't have to wait for them to take action. I would encourage National Societies to take the initiative, to lead.

In the Agenda - and I quote – «states recognise the importance of the independent and auxiliary role of National Societies ... and should negotiate clearly defined roles and responsibilities with their respective National Societies» in the areas of risk reduction and disaster management as well as in public health development and social activities.

It is a question of negotiating, evaluating options, analysing strengths and capacities and agreeing on specific roles and responsibilities – as equal partners. That process is in itself an important step towards opening and ensuring <humanitarian space> for neutral, independent humanitarian action – be it local or international, fully respecting the specific mandates of the components of the Movement.

My predecessor, princess Margriet, said in her opening address to the International Conference: «We are here to make a difference to the lives of persons affected by armed conflicts, disasters and disease. Our relevance will be judged by the difference we make.»

I wholeheartedly agree with her and this is at the core of my challenge to you: what difference will we make? In our National Societies, together with our governments, implementing the decisions we took?

I invite you to reflect on this, to undertake the actions called for to achieve the aims and objectives we defined. – Perhaps some of the work could be done together, regionally here in the Middle East and North Africa. I also invite you to share with us in the Commission your successes and lessons learnt – for others to learn.

Mrs Zoy Katevas, member of the Commission and chair of the working group on statutory meetings, is waiting to hear from you. She has agreed to follow in particular the implementation of what you, or we all together, said we would do and to keep, together with the ICRC and the International Federation, the Commission informed. Feedback and information on progress is essential for planning the next Council and the next Conference. Our credibility is at stake.

Take time when you deliberate and plan; but when the time for action arrives, go for it!

And be courageous: I don't believe you can do today's job with yesterday's methods and be in business tomorrow - said Nelson Jackson.

Thank you.