

**5th Conference
Middle East – North Africa
Marrakech, Morocco
May 15, 2006**

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

Chairman, Standing Commission of the Red Cross and Red Crescent

It is indeed a pleasure for me to be with you at this 5th Conference of the National Societies in the Middle East and North Africa. I must congratulate the organizers for their excellent preparation and choice of theme – Future Humanitarian Challenges. The comprehensive way in which you plan to address these challenges by analyzing the main programmes and how to respond through them shows a very constructive and future oriented approach. A week ago we celebrated World Red Cross/Red Crescent Day and the joint message of the Presidents of the ICRC and the International Federation highlighted the importance of volunteers. I wholeheartedly support that message and welcome the continued discussion on volunteers in our future work.

This important meeting is held at a crucial time when we address new and grave challenges calling on us to adopt our decisions so as to increase the confidence of governments along with that of victims of disaster and armed conflict. As a Movement we are aware of our duties to alleviate suffering in line with our Fundamental Principles and humanitarian values.

One of the most pressing ones we face, as a Movement, is how to better promote tolerance and respect for diversity and fight all kinds of discrimination? I feel it is more urgent that ever to engage in developing different and new ways and means to promote tolerance and multiculturalism as part of our everyday lives and realities and as a basic value in the name of our fundamental principles, indeed in the name of humanity. The Movement can here be a strong driving force and voice in local communities as well as on international fora.

We need to focus attention on promoting better understanding among people and cultures. We should not deepen gaps, which often are based on ignorance on all sides. Instead, we should encourage dialogue and concrete action to develop better mutual understanding among all people and all different cultures. The Red Cross/Red Crescent can, if it so decides, provide appropriate response to challenges associated with confrontations between cultures and religions at the international level as well as within individual countries.

The time is also crucial from another perspective: We will meet again very soon – on 20th and 21st June - at the 29th International Conference in Geneva, with the important objective of amending the Statutes of our Movement in order to bring them into line with the tools of International Humanitarian Law, notably with the third additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, adopted last December by the diplomatic conference in Geneva.

I would once again like to emphasize that the 29th International Conference will not deal with the emblem issue. That issue was closed with the adoption of Protocol III in the morning of December 8 last year, after three days of intense discussion and debate. As a Movement, we have welcomed the adoption, yet have expressed our disappointment that a humanitarian instrument had to be adopted by vote.

In preparing for June, it is incumbent upon us to take into consideration the humanitarian needs of today and aim at adopting the amendments to the statutes by consensus. It is important for us, and for our main partners - the governments, to safeguard the unity of the Movement. It is imperative for the victims and beneficiaries we serve; it is the basis of our principled action and decisive when it comes to granting the components of the Movement access to victims, especially in times of armed conflict.

We seek consensus not only for the amendment of the statutes but also for the recognition and admission of the Palestine Red Crescent Society into our humanitarian Movement. This “will” was expressed by the Palestine Red Crescent and the MDA in Israel when concluding their agreement, the Memorandum of Understanding in late November last year. An agreement, which can be described as revolutionary when considering that it was brought about by two future National Societies in a situation of conflict and occupation. It expresses the will and intention to secure humanitarian services for people suffering from the on-going conflict. I believe this would not have been possible had it not been accomplished in a spirit of goodwill and a deep understanding of the humanitarian principles of our Movement.

In the Final Act from the diplomatic conference, circulated by the Swiss Government, the 144 participating governments explicitly expressed their wish to see both the Palestine Red Crescent and the MDA join the Movement at the next International Conference. It is my expectation that the June Conference will invite the ICRC and the International Federation to implement this ‘expression of will’.

As a follow-up to concerns expressed - especially by Arab governments - in the run-up to and during the diplomatic conference, the June Conference, a conference of the Movement, will hear reports on progress made regarding those concerns. Through the reports we aim to demonstrate that we are a Movement united in addressing humanitarian issues, which together with the fundamental principles are the sole base for our action.

Apart from building consensus around the Conference agenda items, the Movement needs to reinforce consensus as a way of working at this most important forum, the International Conference. The reason is obvious: to ensure that we will be heard and acknowledged also in the future as a Movement when seeking solutions to important humanitarian concerns in partnership with governments.

The diplomatic conference was for the States. The June Conference is a Movement Conference, where the aim is now – as it has been in the past – to discuss and resolve any issues in the spirit of humanity, respecting and adhering to the Fundamental Principles. This is perhaps more important now since the Protocol was adopted by vote.

In preparing for June, we are focused on humanitarian issues and realities. We will not let politics dominate and hijack our Movement Conference. It is vital for the operational value of and respect for the red crystal that we do everything within our power to bring the international community to consensus on the integration of the emblem into our Statutes.

The National Societies in the MENA region are strong, well organised and have always enjoyed good and influential relations with their respective governments. It is my ardent wish that you will continue to use your open communication lines with your governments and exercise your influence towards the common goals we have so often set for the Movement on this specific issue at our Council meetings and at International Conferences since 1999. The Movement needs to be seen as part of the solution – not as part of the problems we may need to resolve in June.

The Standing Commission received comments on the proposed agenda for the Conference from 22 countries, including many from this region, supported by the OIC. The comments reflected concerns for ensuring full admission of the Palestine Red Crescent and for the need to achieve substantial progress in implementing the Memorandum between the PRCS and the MDA as well as fears for the population in Golan. The Commission studied these proposals carefully. Accordingly, we have sought to achieve progress by paying attention to both issues now and in the weeks ahead and by providing better information on work in progress or already completed in the Standing Commission report, which you have received with the formal conference documents sent to you a good week ago.

The report of the Swiss Government, which will be delivered at the Conference, will provide up-to-date information on progress made with the PRCS/MDA Memorandum. The ICRC is finalising its plans for the needed health services to the population in Golan based on their assessment of those needs. An update of that work will also be available to the Conference.

Between now and 20 June I will do my utmost - together with the ICRC and the International Federation - to iron out and smooth the way for a harmonious, smoothly running and successful Conference, in which we certainly need the constructive participation of all National Societies.

I'm an optimist by nature and I do believe that in the end our humanitarian values and interests will prevail. This also acknowledges the fact that there are a large number of relevant and justified concerns that will occupy the minds of people both at the Conference and on the ground, brought about by ongoing conflicts and tensions. Ensuring that the Movement stays united will improve our resolve and our promise to address humanitarian concerns and to

influence other fora, which are better placed to deal with and seek political solutions necessary in today's many and differing conflicts.

May I conclude by wishing this conference success in its deliberations on addressing the work and actions needed to bring help and support to the vulnerable - at home and elsewhere. This remains our main task - our Mission. As leaders of Red Cross/Red Crescent and active participants we will be judged by how well we respond to the challenges of today and the humanitarian needs so evident everywhere. That is our ultimate challenge representing the Power of Humanity.